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地底王国の脅威

神坂 一

富士見ファンタジア文庫

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Slayers Special Volume 26
The Threat of the Underground Kingdom!

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By the Shore of the Demon Sea [Part 1]

The vast, infinite ocean. To humanity, it was an unknown realm.

The one who approached with the rhythmic tapping of footsteps was a captain sporting a well-kept white beard. His left hand—a prosthetic iron hook—glinted sharply as it caught the sunlight.

The movements of the crew grew frantic, and by the time the ship finally came to a halt, we had reached a point where the land we departed from was a mere blur on the horizon.

"The treasure sleeps beneath this spot."

I peered into the midday sea as he spoke, but the water merely reflected the sun’s rays, glittering dazzlingly. There was nothing in the wind but the scent of the tide.

Between the mainland and the ship, a few small islands were visible, but naturally, they were all uninhabited. After all, who would want to live right on the edge of the Demon Sea? ...Well, I suppose we were the ones crazy enough to come even further past those islands.

"Is it here?"

Tania, the woman who had been staring at the sea from the gunwale, turned around and spoke. She had short red hair and sun-baked skin; she looked to be slightly older than me. She wore nothing but a cloth wrap around her chest and another around her hips, but considering she was about to dive into the ocean, it wasn't a particularly strange outfit.

"Yeah. This is it."

It had all started yesterday.

"I heard there’s a traveling sorcerer in town!"

A voice roared through the eatery just after noon, loud enough to make every customer go silent for a moment.

"—Are you talking about me, perhaps?"

I was the one who spoke up—Lina Inverse—as I sat by the window, watching the sea while finishing my meal. With my black bandana, black mantle, and the various jewel amulets I wore all over my body, there wasn't anyone else in the shop who looked more like a sorcerer than I did.

I was traveling alone, and having felt a sudden urge to look at the ocean because of the recent heat, I had stopped by this seaside town called Kareen. It was a place that prospered decently enough through fishing and coastal trade, having a proper harbor, but otherwise, it was a town with few distinguishing features. That said, the seafood was noteworthy, and I had ended up staying the night just to gorge myself on various dishes.

Somehow, word of my presence had spread, and it seemed I was about to receive a visitor.

"So it's you."

A man in his fifties dressed in a captain’s uniform approached. He walked with a firm, steady gait that betrayed no sign of his age. Without a word of greeting, he sat down across from me at the table, gave me a sharp, piercing look, and leaned in.

"Can you use spells for diving underwater?" he whispered.

"Well, yes," I replied. I was currently in the middle of stuffing a piece of fried whitefish with starchy sauce into my mouth. "—Wait a second. Before we talk—"

I proceeded to polish off the seven or so dishes lined up on the table in one go.

After the meal, Captain Virgo Photof—as he had introduced himself—led me to a spot a bit away from the wharf. It was a perfect place for a private conversation. There were no ships nearby, the view was open, and the sound of the waves drowned out our voices, preventing any eavesdropping.

"By a stroke of luck, I got my hands on a sea chart studied by a certain navigator. It recorded the tidal currents in extreme detail... and that's when I realized it."

He looked out toward the distant horizon. The water sparkled under the gentle sunlight, and small island silhouettes could be seen in the distance. It was a picture of peace.

"—Shipwrecks!!"

"Shipwrecks...?"

"Exactly. In the Demon Sea."

The Captain's voice grew heavy and sank low.

The Demon Sea. It was a realm of death that separated our world from the outside—a boundary maintained by the Mazoku. It was a cursed sea of rumors. Any ship that headed toward it was met with equal destruction—or so the story went. Regardless of the truth about the Mazoku, it was an undeniable fact that for hundreds of years, or perhaps longer, not a single ship that left the coast for the open ocean had ever returned.

"Most ships that sink in the Demon Sea eventually drift out to the waters off this coast due to the currents. Along with their full loads of cargo, that is. The sea chart proved it. If we can salvage that, we'll be filthy rich. Not a bad deal, right?"

"—And yet, you've been having trouble finding anyone to take you up on the offer?"

The Captain lost his words for a split second at my immediate jab.

"A town of this size should have at least a few sorcerers. Despite that, you went out of your way to find a traveling sorcerer like me. That means you've been turned down repeatedly until now, right? ...Well, I can't blame them."

I gave a small shrug.

"The 'offshore' area means near the Demon Sea. You never know what might happen. Going all the way out there to look for treasure that 'probably' 'should' be there—the reward might be big, but the risk is definitely huge. With those odds, no one would accept, no matter how good the terms are."

At my critique, the Captain fell into a sullen silence.

"And what about you? Why did you decide to go treasure hunting in the first place? You said you're a merchant captain; you don't look like you're struggling to put food on the table."

"......Hmph....."

When I asked, the Captain cast a lonely gaze down at his left hand—the prosthetic.

"Revenge..... I suppose."

"For your left hand?" I asked him.

Perhaps his hand had been taken by a shark or a giant white whale in the past, and this was his revenge? But if so, I didn't see how treasure hunting factored into it.

The Captain let out a deep sigh. "When a man lives long enough, he ends up fighting many things... In my long war with *that*, I lost many things, starting with this left hand..."

"What is '*that*'?"

".....It’s a story for another time. Regardless, I take it you have no intention of accepting."

The Captain turned on his heel to leave.

"Who said that?"

My voice hit his back, and his feet came to a dead stop.

"If you only offered standard terms to an average sorcerer, of course they’d turn you down."

The Captain slowly turned back toward me. "Oh? Then what kind of terms would an *extraordinary* sorcerer require to accept?"

Looking at the Captain’s shining eyes, I let a small smile play on my lips.

"The contract is for a limited time. Half the fee is paid in advance. You cover all living expenses, like food. This applies whether the treasure is found or not. If treasure *is* found, in addition to the normal share—if there are any magical items, I sell them to the Sorcerer's Association through my own channels. That should prevent us from being cheated or lowballed. In exchange, I take ten percent of that sale as a brokerage fee. Of course, I still get my fair share of the remaining ninety percent. .....How does that sound?"

With this, even if we didn't find any treasure, it would essentially be like getting paid pocket money to go on a boat trip for a while. It wasn't a bad deal at all. Well, it didn't change the fact that being near the Demon Sea was dangerous, though.

"—You’re a sharp one. Fine by me."

The Captain gave a wry smile at my proposal—and with that, the deal was struck.

The Captain had called it a "shabby" merchant ship, but it was actually very well-maintained. That said, it wasn't large for a merchant vessel; when the entire crew of seven—including me and the Captain—gathered, the foredeck was completely filled.

Behind the Captain, his four subordinates stood in a neat line. Standing opposite them were Tania and I, both in our swimwear. Ideally, it would be faster to have everyone dive and search, but there was a reason we were doing it this way.

I knew two spells for underwater activity. However, they both shared a common flaw: the spells could not be cast on others.

Therefore, I chose a simple water-spirit spell called *Aqua Breathe*, which merely allowed one to breathe underwater. It was a beginner-level, convenient spell in the realm of magic. As long as one memorized the words and chanted them, even someone who knew nothing about magic could use it.

"First, I’ll have you two start the search around here."

Captain Virgo Photof stood tall on the deck, his raspy voice echoing across the open sea.

Even those without magical talent could use it.

"It's just as we discussed... but I'm going to explain it one more time just in case!"

The plan was to have the Captain's subordinates memorize this spell so they could dive. However, to those who had never even dabbled in the mystic arts, a spell was nothing more than a string of meaningless characters. I held the last remaining torch myself and raised my voice.

"Those diving must not stray too far from beneath this ship! Do not let go of these torches while in the ocean! If you feel the light beginning to dim, return to the ship without hesitation! Once it starts to fade, the rest goes quickly, and by the time this light goes out, the effects of the underwater breathing spell will also vanish!"

Even though it was a simple spell, it seemed they struggled quite a bit to commit it to memory. By the time yesterday turned into today, Tania was the only one who had managed to memorize it well enough to actually trigger the incantation through an overnight cram session.

"You never know what might happen in the sea, so if even the slightest thing feels wrong, come back to the ship immediately! ...Well, by the second or third day, I'm sure more of you will have learned the spell... but for now, those waiting on deck—"

To compensate for the shortage of personnel, I had decided to dive as well.

"Then first, I ask that you prepare the lights."

Following our prior arrangement, the Captain spoke and handed me some wooden rods. There were three in total, each about the size of a shortsword.

"Okay."

I took them, chanted a spell under my breath, and placed a *Lighting* spell on the tip of each one. With that, my underwater-ready torches were complete. I stood one up on the deck, handed one to Tania, and pointed to the torch on the deck.

"Use this to check the time until those diving return! If something happens up here, attach a weight to this torch and sink it as a signal! If that signal is given, those underwater must return to the ship immediately, no matter what! —Any questions?"

I looked around at the group, and everyone remained silent.

"—Hey—"

"What is it?"

The one who spoke up was one of the crew members staying behind.

"Well... I don't want you to take this the wrong way... it's just for the sake of 'what if'..." He was being strangely hesitant.

"Just say it."

"If... just *if*, okay... if the light on that torch goes out..." He cast a glance at the torch on the deck. "What if... what if no one comes back by then...?"

For a moment, silence fell over the deck. It wasn't an impossible scenario. We were, after all, right on the edge of the Demon Sea now.

"---That much is obvious, isn't it?"

I gave a small laugh and declared firmly.

"Don't look back; just turn around and head for the mainland, and never come near a place like this again. That’s all you can do, right?"

".....Understood....."

At my answer, the sailor fell silent, his face pale.

The water wrapped around my body, feeling warmer than I had expected. When I looked up, I saw the shimmering surface of the water and the shadow of the ship.

Something crossed the edge of my vision—I turned to look, but there was nothing there. It was probably just a fish... but it didn't feel very pleasant. When I tried to touch the bottom, the gritty sensation was accompanied by a massive cloud of sand or something similar that billowed up, clouding the water. I decided to stop walking and proceed by swimming instead.

The water's transparency wasn't particularly low, but... faced with an overwhelming darkness, the light in my hand felt incredibly small. It might not have been my imagination. Something felt like it was there—a massive, pale... darkness.

But at the very least, what existed there now was the same dark bottom as anywhere else. It might have been a hallucination born of anxiety. Or, if the Captain’s guess was correct, it might have been a shipwreck. However—for some reason, I absolutely did not feel like going over there to check, so I headed in a different direction.

That didn't exactly make my mood any brighter. Tania’s form had become nothing more than a black silhouette, and the light in her hand was just a blur across the water. If I lost sight of her light for even a moment, an immense sense of loneliness rushed over me. It felt like a delusion—the illusion that I was the only person left in this sea, or rather, in the entire world.

The deeper I dove, the harder it became for the light from above to reach me, and the surrounding darkness grew thicker. Accordingly, the water temperature gradually dropped—but eventually, the torchlight dimly illuminated the rugged seabed.

Something strange. Rocks of odd shapes or something else covered the area like jagged scales, looking like nothing I had ever seen before. I jerked my head to the left, startled! I was certain I had seen something massive over there.

But at least for today, there were no notable results.

Diving and surfacing, moving the ship to a different point, then diving and surfacing again. After repeating this several times, the sun went down, and the first day's search ended. The sky was filled with stars. The lights of the mainland, which should have been in the distance, were too far away to see.

If we really wanted to, we could have returned the ship to the mainland, but to avoid the time loss of traveling back and forth, we decided to anchor off the nearest small uninhabited island and spend the night there.

"So you were over here."

Tania called out to me after dinner, while I was on deck looking at the surroundings.

"This is my first time spending a night on the ocean."

"—Well, I suppose that’s true for most normal people."

She walked up beside me.

"Even merchant ships mostly stick to coastal routes. Fishermen usually head out early and return to port by noon or evening. Coming to a place like this near the Demon Sea is practically an adventure in itself. I'm surprised you accepted a request like this."

"Learning things I didn't know before is interesting, isn't it?" I said, looking at the stars. "Besides, you're all going along with a 'request like this' too."

".....Well, we trust the Old Man."

"The 'Old Man'—"

"The Captain. Everyone calls him that."

She stood shoulder-to-shoulder with me and looked up at the night sky.

"He's a man who has lived on the sea since long before I was born. He has experience and has survived countless life-and-death situations. Working near the Demon Sea is nothing to him."

"—Speaking of life-and-death situations—"

I suddenly remembered and lowered my voice slightly to ask.

"Is that how the Captain lost his left hand too? I only heard that he was 'done in' by *that*—"

She dropped her gaze to the sea.

".....Apparently..... she was a terrifying wife....."

"Whoa."

...Th-that kind of battle...?

"I didn't know her personally, though. The Old Man used to grumble about it whenever he drank... Well, that wife of his disappeared a little while ago after finding another man, so the Old Man got all fired up, saying he'd definitely find the treasure and show her..... and that's why... he was talking about 'revenge' or whatever..."

".....W...Well, that's something....."

"Yeah..... I honestly think it's a bit much too....."

Tania and I both murmured bitterly, and a subtly awkward atmosphere drifted between us. The sound of water lapping against the hull continued for a while.

"Well... anyway, tomorrow is early. Get some rest soon. And actually, don't tell anyone I told you about his wife."

...I couldn't tell anyone even if I wanted to. Apparently, after being made fun of and told by his wife that such a thing couldn't possibly exist, he had been strictly forbidden from acting on it and had been unable to move until she was gone.

"I know."

I replied and headed back to the cabin with her.

The change occurred the following day. It was around noon, after we had already dived several times since morning.

"Captain!"

Tania's voice, which echoed out, had something unusual mixed in it. Captain Virgo, and I—who had surfaced earlier—rushed to the gunwale. Tania, her face popping out of the water, looked up at us and said one thing:

"There’s a ship sunk down there."

a stir went through the deck. She climbed up the rope ladder hanging from the ship and handed something she had tucked into the edge of her swimwear to the Captain.

".....This is...!"

On his palm lay a large gold coin covered in rust and water moss.

"I found what looks like a ship's mast," Tania said as she wiped her body down with a towel. "I checked the area... and found that."

The Captain scraped the rust and dirt off the gold coin with his left prosthetic.

"A coin I haven't seen before... is that a shark engraved on it?"

"I might know something about that," I interjected from the side.

I had never seen the real thing, but I had read an illustrated explanation at a Sorcerers' Association somewhere once.

"A Mahel gold coin. It's currency from a kingdom that was destroyed about a hundred and sixty years ago."

The deck buzzed again. The Captain said excitedly, "Which means?"

"It means a ship from that era is sunk down there," I nodded slightly. "Furthermore, the place where that kingdom existed is far from here. The fact that such a thing is sunk here means it was carried by the sea currents. In other words, Captain, your hunch was correct."

"Awesome!"

"You did it, Old Man!"

I sent a wink their way and added, "—Well, from here on, it would be a lot easier if you guys would properly memorize the spell and help us out."

They all groaned in unison.

Two lights descended side-by-side into the darkness.

The light emitted by the magical torches held by Tania and me. Following her lead, I followed her deeper and deeper toward the bottom. In the end, even today on the second day, no one had managed to memorize the spell. They would mess up somewhere, or their accent would change the meaning of the incantation. Consequently, today the actual work was once again just the two of us, Tania and me.

"I think salvaging it will be tough," Tania said from the side.

"I took a quick look, and the ship is pretty much in tatters. We have to be careful, or it'll fall apart."

"Well, there might be other ships sunk nearby. We'll go back as soon as we've had a little rest. Tania."

"Needless to say."

Tania and I high-fived.

At the dark bottom of the ocean's abyss, perhaps a tiny bit of surface light still reached us; the black shadow seen dimly was a massive cross standing tilted on the seabed. It was the mast of a large ship. Naturally, the sails had rotted away long ago, and only the mast remained, standing now like a gravestone.

Looking at the area Tania pointed to with a gesture, various things were scattered across the seabed. We immediately began rummaging through the surroundings. This time, we had brought mesh bags. If we found anything noteworthy, we would toss it in and take it back to the ship.

The plan was to analyze them on deck, and if nothing seemed promising, we would look for a different shipwreck.

Rotten pieces of wood, fragments of earthenware or pottery. Or perhaps rusted metal and coins. Among the pieces of wood, some crumbled away the moment I pinched them with my fingers. Various things were rolling around, but the hope of finding something like a grimoire was slim. After being submerged in water for this long, parchment and the like would surely be in tatters.

Most of the coins were copper, and at most, there were a few things that had become lumps of rust—likely what used to be silver coins. Gold coins were hard to find.

While I was wandering around peeking at things, unable to find anything of value, a strange chill ran down my back. I jerked my gaze around—but all I saw was the same silent seabed. What was this?

Something similar had happened yesterday... was it really just my imagination? Just as I was standing there thinking that, someone suddenly tapped my shoulder. I turned around in a hurry to see Tania standing beside me. I followed the direction she was pointing—

A single light was descending from above. Was that magical light? It was likely the torch we had left on the ship. In other words, the signal to surface immediately. We looked at each other, nodded, and headed upward.

The shadow of the ship appeared in the light of the surface, growing larger and larger in my field of vision—

"What happened?" I shouted the moment my head broke the water.

"——We have a visitor!"

The Captain’s voice came, though he didn't show his face.

A visitor?

I grabbed the ship's rope ladder and climbed up. Tania followed behind me. Once I reached the deck—I finally understood the meaning of "visitor." On the gunwale facing the land—the opposite side from where the rope ladder was lowered—the Captain and the other sailors were huddled together.

Approaching from across the waves was a single sailing vessel.

"It came out from behind the shadow of that uninhabited island," Captain Virgo said.

That was all he needed to say. One look was enough to identify the newcomers. On the deck of the ship—which was a size larger than ours—stood about twenty crew members. There was still distance between us, but their appearance was clear enough to make out.

They had indiscriminately brutal faces. In their hands, they clutched swords, spears, and bows. This was the legendary pirate gang—

"So pirates actually still exist," Tania murmured beside me, sounding almost impressed.

"They're probably thinking we’re their first catch in ages," I noted.

The pirate ship’s hull shook violently as the sea surged—caught in the swell, the vessel was tossed about. Waiting for the rocking to subside, I shouted:

"You pirates over there! If you value your lives, stop your ship and raise a white flag! If you do, I’ll spare you from becoming fish food!"
"Is this really the time for leisurely chatter?! We're moving! Everyone to your stations!"

I interrupted the Captain’s orders and released the spell I had been chanting.

Dragon Slave!

Zun.

The strike, which I detonated far ahead of the pirate ship, gouged out the seawater and vaporized it, creating a massive wake.

Following my ultimatum, a plain white flag soon fluttered from the pirate ship's mast.

The pirate captain’s lament continued shortly after.

"Supplies? We didn't have any of that! There aren't exactly any ships passing through these waters to begin with... most ships stick to the coastline like leeches. Just when I thought we’d finally found actual prey, this happens..."

".....We started out as mountain bandits, you see... but the officials’ crackdowns got too strict..... so, we set our sights on the sea....."

The pirate captain, now tied to our mast, muttered to no one in particular with a distant look in his eyes.

"At first, I thought this was the perfect plan..... If we made an uninhabited island near the Demon Sea our base, there wouldn't be any raids from officials, I thought....."

He had been scraping by on the uninhabited island eating nuts, fish, and seaweed.

"We haven't even done anything bad yet....."

He lacked any shred of self-awareness.

"Well, don't look so blue," Captain Virgo said, glancing over his shoulder at the mast.

While there was no room for sympathy, it was a fact that we now had extra hands.

I decided to have the captured pirates memorize the underwater breathing spell. I split them into squads to help with the underwater search in shifts.

Efficiency improved drastically!

One might wonder how a bunch of pirates managed to memorize a spell so easily—but after I gave them a flowery smile and declared, "Even if you can't remember the spell, I'll have you stay underwater for the same amount of time anyway ♡," every single pirate desperately committed the incantation to memory.

"If you find more treasure than expected and swear to wash your hands of the pirate business, I'll reconsider handing you over to the officials, and I might even give you a small cut. If the salvage takes a long time, I might even hire you."

"R-Really!?!?" The pirate captain's face lit up.

"Yeah. A man of the sea doesn't lie."

At those words, the pirate captain burst into tears of gratitude. While that was happening on deck...

Splash!

A man who had been diving surfaced abruptly.

"——What happened!"

There should have been plenty of time left before the shift change. Before the man could answer Captain Virgo's call, a second and third diver bobbed to the surface.

"There's something down there. A huge thing, like nothing I've ever seen!"

Tania's voice, as she climbed back onto the deck, was trembling slightly. The "something" I was sure I had seen in the water. That chill I had felt. It hadn't been my imagination after all.

"Something is here!"

The first man's voice was thick with obvious terror.

"I found a second sunken ship. I was heading toward it... and I ran into *that*."

"Something? Like a Sea Serpent?!"

Captain Virgo muttered sullenly. Even as he spoke, divers were surfacing one after another, frantically swimming toward the ship.

"I don't know. But I don't think it's one of those," I said.

"Captain! Get ready to move the ship! Hurry!" Tania screamed the moment she showed her face.

So it really was there. Something.

"Ready for departure!" Captain Virgo shouted, sensing something even if he didn't fully understand yet. The crew began moving frantically.

"——Ready for departure!"

The sailor's voice rang out just as all the divers had scrambled back onto our ship and the pirate ship.

"Right full rudder! Aim for the nearest island—"

It was then that the sailors at the gunwale raised a clamor. When I looked, a portion of the water nearby was stained by a shadow.

It was there. A massive, elongated *something*. And it was heading straight for us without hesitation.

(By the Shore of the Demon Sea: To be continued)

By the Shore of the Demon Sea [Part 2]

Synopsis: After accepting a request to help salvage treasure from a shipwreck, Lina, along with Captain Virgo and the sailor Tania, set out to the waters near the Demon Sea. While finding sunken ships and gold coins, Lina's group intimidated a band of pirates into working for them. However, as the search progressed, a long, massive, unidentified black shadow began closing in on their ship!

The shadow in the sea was coming right at us!

"What the hell is that!!"

Listening to Captain Virgo's shout, I was already chanting a spell. The water's surface rippled. The shadow grew darker. No—it wasn't a shadow, but a massive black *something*. As far as I was concerned, an uninvited guest should take its leave immediately! I released the completed spell toward the shadow!

Dragon Slave!

Gwa-oom!

With a single strike, the sea erupted. The explosive light erased the shadow and created waves that rocked the ship. The sailors screamed and cursed, yet somehow managed to keep the vessel upright against the violent wind and waves.

By the time the surface calmed, the two ships had been pushed considerably closer to the mainland from their original position. The fact that the ship was safe despite that wind and impact was thanks to the crew's skill. I expected complaints, but they were simply staring.

At the spot where the black shadow had been racing moments ago. Now, there was nothing.

".....Did we get it.....?" Captain Virgo muttered, half-filled with anxiety and half with hope.

But I was the one who answered. "The answer is probably no."

"Even after an explosion like that?!"

"I couldn't land a direct hit. The water acted as a cushion," I explained, my eyes fixed on the sea. "It might have been knocked unconscious by the shock, but... we didn't finish it off."

"But—"

To the Captain, who was trying to cling to optimism, I shook my head slightly.

"Tell me... if a creature that size had been blown to bits, don't you think the sea would be a lot murkier?"

"Certainly....."

The Captain stared at the sea and nodded with a bitter tone. "Then..... if it's still alive, do you think it will come back again.....?"

Of course, since the creature’s identity was unknown, its habits were a mystery.

"Probably," I replied. It was just a hunch—but for some reason, I felt a sense of certainty.

The Captain asked another question. "If it comes back... do you have the confidence to defeat it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "If I can land a direct hit with that last spell, I think I can kill it... but for that, we'd need it to come out of the water or something. And I don't think it'll do that just because we ask nicely. Besides—if there are two or more of those things, then it’s really... hopeless."

Captain Virgo looked at me and opened his mouth, but ended up closing it without saying a word. He stared at the sea.

".....I understand....." he whispered. Then he turned on his heel and declared loudly to the sailors, "——We're heading back to land!"

And so, the request ended. Captain Virgo put the safety of his crew first, cancelled the salvage operation, and returned the ship to shore. The ship reached the port at evening. The pirates were all tied up, to be dealt with by Captain Virgo later.

I decided to be satisfied with the advance payment I had already received and took a room at an inn.

However. While the request had certainly ended, the story didn't end there.

"Thank goodness! You're still here!"

A woman's voice echoed through the dining room on the first floor of the inn. It was morning, and the sunlight was streaming through the window just as I was about to achieve a total conquest of every single item on the breakfast menu. I looked toward the familiar voice—it was Tania. She wasn't in her swimwear today, of course, but in normal clothes.

In that instant—I had a general idea of what had happened.

She rushed to my table with a face etched with panic. "The Old Man went out to sea!"

It was exactly what I had expected her to say.

"Salvaging that treasure was the Old Man's dream. But if that thing is out there, there's no way to work safely. He thought of our safety and brought the ship back to land....."

"They left early this morning on the pirates' ship..."

"The pirates' ship?" I asked.

"Everyone else is with him—the whole crew. But considering what might happen out there, we need your strength. So please! I can’t offer much of a reward, but..."

She pulled a single gold coin from her pocket and placed it on the table.

".....This is..."

"The one I found in the sea the other day."

I stood up from my seat, leaving my meal exactly as it was on the table, and picked up the gold coin. To be honest, this part was unexpected. I found myself raising my voice in a mix of surprise and realization.

The opponents were, after all, a bunch of pirates who lived life on a gamble. It would be easy to talk them into a high-stakes bet like treasure hunting in monster-infested

waters. Thanks to my "Spartan education," most of them had mastered the art of breathing underwater, making them ideal laborers.

"If it’s not enough—"

"—No. It’s plenty."

To put it more bluntly, they were pirates—villains, originally. My heart wouldn't ache much even if one or two of them got eaten by an unidentified creature. When I thought about it, this was a remarkably rational use of human resources. He had likely been planning this since yesterday.

"Hmph... you're quite something, Captain Virgo," I muttered, crossing my arms in genuine impressed.

"This is no time to be weirdly impressed! Please, help me bring the Old Man back. Our ship is still in the harbor, so—"

It would leave a bad taste in my mouth to refuse at this point. I turned toward the staff of the dining room.

"Excuse me! Check, please! Also, wrap this food up, I'm taking it with me!"

And so, we set out once again for the shores of the Demon Sea.

The answer was exactly as expected.

A silhouette appeared amidst the shimmering waves. It was unmistakably the pirate ship I had seen yesterday. Tania and the crew handled the sails and the rudder, steering our ship toward it. I could see the pirates working on deck. Eventually, a figure appeared on the gunwale of the pirate ship, glaring our way.

"Old Man!" Tania shouted.

"What did you come here for! Go back!"

Before she could say another word, the Captain’s raspy voice reached us, carried by the sea breeze. Tania flinched for a second.

"What do you mean 'what for'?! I came to bring you back, obviously!"

Of course, she must have known. Just telling him to come home wasn't going to make him nod and say "Okay." If it were that simple, he wouldn't have left everyone behind and set off with a bunch of pirates in the first place.

"I’m not going back!"

"It’s dangerous here!" Tania shouted back, refusing to back down.

"Where I stay is my own business! Just go back to the port already!"

It was a sound argument, strictly speaking. Tania fell silent, backing off. However, while he might be able to outtalk Tania, silencing me was an impossibility. I looked off toward the horizon and shouted in a complete monotone:

"Oh no! This is terrible! Captain Virgo is being threatened by pirates and forced to say those things! Since it’s come to this, we have to save him by any means necessary—I know, I’ll just use an attack spell and sink that ship! Then they'll have no choice but to board our ship!"

"Wait...! Wait just a minute!"

At my declaration of brute force, Captain Virgo’s face finally changed color.

"I’m not being threatened at all!"

"Ah. There goes Captain Virgo again, being threatened into saying those things! I have to hurry up and attack!" Still monotone.

The Captain and the pirates were thrown into a total panic. Beside me, Tania was stifling a laugh, whispering to me, "...Everyone’s panicking. I see, so that’s how you use a bluff."

"A bluff?" I asked.

I let the corner of my mouth twist into a small, wicked smirk.

Tania drew back slightly and yelled toward the pirate ship, "Old Maaannn! This person is actually serious about doing it!"

"Whaaaat?!"

The Captain panicked at her warning.

"Wait! Even if we turn back, there are still people diving! Let's at least have a talk first!"

And so, my bluff hit the mark, and we moved to have a discussion. To strike at the enemy, one must first strike their allies.

"Seriously... what a reckless thing to suggest, sinking the ship..."

On the pirate ship, during a lull in our discussion, Captain Virgo spoke in an exasperated tone. Even while we talked, the pirates continued the salvage work, though so far there had been no major results.

I just waved my hand with a bright smile. "Ah, that was just a bluff, a bluff. If I hadn't said that, we would've just spent the whole time yelling 'Go home!' and 'I won't!' at each other without any real talk."

Tania looked at me with a suspicious gaze. "But what if the Old Man had said, 'I'm not falling for a bluff like that'? What were you going to do then?"

"Hmm! Well... I suppose I would have fired off two or three attack spells at the ship as a 'threat'—"

"Um. If you actually do it, it’s not called a 'bluff' or a 'threat' anymore."

At Tania's point, I thought for a moment.

"Well, let's get to the main point."

I let out a deep sigh.

"Wow. She changed the subject so smoothly," someone muttered beside me.

I shot a sharp glance at the person—it was the pirate captain. Or rather, since Captain Virgo was the one in command now, I suppose I should call him the *former* pirate captain.

"And before that. Why are *you* even part of this discussion?" I asked.

"It’s not entirely unrelated to these guys," Captain Virgo said. "I made a deal with them."

Tania tilted her head. "A deal?"

"Yeah. I told them: 'I know it’s dangerous, but help me find and salvage the treasure. If we find it, you’ll get a share. In exchange, once you have a sufficient share, you have to wash your hands of piracy. If you help out and keep your promise, I’ll let you off the hook and won't hand you over to the officials.'"

".....You know..... Captain....." I sighed. "I’m sure these guys are saying 'yes, yes' right now because they don't want to be handed over to the officials, but do you really think they’ll keep a promise like that? Once this is over, they’ll just go right back to their old trade."

"That’s a misunderstanding, Big Sis!" the former pirate captain interrupted, leaning in.

"Who are you calling 'Big Sis'?! You’re clearly twice my age!"

"Ah! My apologies! No, I mean, even we didn't become pirates because we *wanted* to!"

"---Meaning there’s some kind of circumstance?" Tania asked.

"Nah. There definitely isn't," I said, waving my hand dismissively. "They already said they were originally mountain bandits."

"There is a reason!" the former captain said forcefully. "We... we just... we just hated the idea of working hard and being honest! That’s all it was!"

"Don't say it so proudly."

Thwack.

The heel of my boot buried itself in his head.

"A-A monstrous sorcerer who solves everything with attack spells is pretty much the same when it comes to not working a 'honest' job—I'm sorry, I'm lying, that was a mistake, I take it back, don't look at me with those eyes, please don't kill me. I... I mean, we figured if we were going to live a life of 'all or nothing' anyway, looking for treasure was a better way to go. It doesn't cause trouble for other people, and we won't be chased by officials anymore."

"In short, these guys are saying they’ll try to become decent human beings," Captain Virgo explained. "I wanted to settle my own dream, even if it meant taking risks. But I didn't want to involve my original crew in such a selfish whim. And these guys, even if

it’s a bit dangerous, want to try a slightly better path in life. So, I figured this was the best way."

"I see, I see." I scratched my head. "Well, I get what you're saying. That’s the hope and convenience of the Captain and the pirates. But—"

I turned toward Tania and the rest of the crew. "What are your opinions?"

When asked, Tania said firmly, "I’m happy that the Old Man is worried about us. But we're worried about the Old Man too. ...But... I also understand the Old Man's feeling of wanting to settle his own dream. If that's the case, I want to see the result of that dream with my own eyes."

"Me too," "Me too," the other crew members chimed in.

".....You guys....." The Captain muttered, overcome with emotion.

Tania continued, "And my share of the treasure better be a large one."

"Me too," "Me too," the others added.

".....You guys....."

Striking it rich and living a life of ease—that’s a dream shared by all of humanity. ...Though, I wonder about this particular bunch. Well, whatever.

"—And that’s how it is," I said to Captain Virgo. "You thought about everyone's safety and tried to chase your dream alone while helping the pirates change their lives—but you didn't think about everyone *else's* feelings. Now that you know how they feel, what do you think is the best thing to do?"

".....Hm....."

The Captain thought in silence for a while—then let out a long breath.

".....I understand..... Then, everyone—will you accompany me in my selfishness?"

"YEAH!"

the voices of the sailors harmonized. Even the former pirates on deck seemed to be getting caught up in the excitement. I suppose they were the type who were easily swept up by the mood.

I nodded to myself. *All's well that ends well.* I walked over to Tania.

"In the end, this turned out quite different from the request to 'bring the Captain back,' but... is this okay?"

"No. It's plenty," Tania said. "In fact, this might have worked out better in the end. We didn't have to make the Old Man give up on his dream. If you hadn't stepped in and forced a discussion—even a bit aggressively—things wouldn't have gone this well. You have my thanks."

As she smiled at me, I gave her a bright grin in return.

"No need for thanks. I got what I came for. Well then, I'm going to use a flight spell to head back to the mainland. You guys do your best not to die, okay? ♡"

I raised a hand in a casual wave and turned on my heel. Just as I was about to chant the spell—*Grip!*—Tania suddenly caught me in a full nelson from behind.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"No, I'm not worried about *that* part! If you leave now, what are we supposed to do if that thing shows up again?!"

Faced with her question, I didn't hesitate. I balled my hand into a fist, stuck my thumb up, and said:

"Do your best."

"We can't! It's impossible!" Tania shouted, flailing her legs while still keeping me pinned.

I flailed right back, refusing to give in.

"Look, Tania, didn't you *just* say 'this is plenty' a second ago?!"

"It's plenty for persuading the Old Man, yeah!"

"Then the request is over! I'm going home! Right now!"

"You heartless monster!"

"Heartless or not, the job is finished!"

"I’m not joking! Why should I have to fight some unidentified sea monster for the price of a single gold coin?!"

We continued to struggle, but in a pure contest of strength, Tania clearly had the upper hand.

In the middle of all this.

"Sorry to interrupt, but is this a bad time?"

It was Captain Virgo who stepped in.

"What?" Tania and I asked in unison.

He spoke in an incredibly calm tone, pointing out toward the sea. In the direction of his gaze, the former pirates who had been diving were surfacing one after another in a panicked splashing frenzy.

"It’s too late. It looks like it’s here."

Deep beneath the water, far beyond them, a massive, long, black shadow was swaying slowly as it approached.

"I’m counting on you, young lady!"

The two ships became a hive of activity following Captain Virgo's command.

"What are we going to do?!" I asked.

Without even turning around, the Captain shouted his orders to the crew. "We flee toward the land and wait for things to cool down! That’s it!"

"That's it... you say..."

Literally and figuratively, I was in the same boat as them now.

"Fine! I'm going in with a big one!"

The Captain roared and barked various instructions. Soon, all the workers were back on board, and the black shadow closed in on the ships—

"Do it, young lady!" Captain Virgo's voice rang out.

I chanted the spell under my breath—aiming at the approaching shadow—

"Dragon Slave!"

PA-AN!

The spray erupted, the sea burst open, and the resulting wind and waves rocked the ship.

"It's still coming!"

Driven by the momentum of the blast, our ship was pushed toward the land just as it had been before—but the shadow was still advancing!

I began chanting again. If I could land a direct hit with the *Dragon Slave*, I could finish it. But in this current situation, that was difficult.

"What about the target?" the Captain asked.

Tania chimed in. Looking out, I saw that in the still-churning water, the swaying black shadow was once again aiming for us.

"No way!"

I bit back the shout that almost escaped my throat. I hadn't expected to kill it, but I thought the shock might at least knock it unconscious.

In reality, water transmits vibration and impact much better than air. If a massive spell like *Dragon Slave* detonates at close range, even if the target doesn't die, the shock should rattle its brain and knock it out. Usually.

Freeze Rain!

I triggered the spell I had chanted in the water. This was originally an annoying, "funny" spell used by a certain sorcerer who failed at being a human being and called herself my rival. It creates a sphere of ice that continuously fires icicle arrows in all

directions; if used normally, the caster would be in a massive pinch along with everyone else.

I had tweaked the spell slightly to make the sphere appear inside the sea. If the shadow in the water tried to approach carelessly, it would receive a baptism of icicles. Of course, given the size of the opponent, killing it was impossible. It would probably feel like nothing more than being pricked by thorns, but if it acted as a deterrent and slowed it down, that would be enough. If we could escape in the meantime, we'd be lucky.

Naturally—that logic only applied if the opponent was a normal living creature.

However, there was no point in arguing about what "should" be impossible. It was definitely still coming for us.

Unlike a heavy-hitter like *Dragon Slave*, the casting time for this was short, allowing for continuous use. At most, this was all I could do for now.

The ship raced toward the shore, I kept chanting, and the shadow kept chasing. Perhaps the harassment was working to some degree, as the shadow's speed dropped slightly, but it showed no signs of giving up the pursuit. The icicles fired underwater floated to the surface with a *pop-pop* sound, sparkling beautifully in the sunlight—if the situation weren't so dire, it would have been quite a sight.

Wait a second...

I had a sudden thought and chanted a different spell—slamming a cold-based spell against the surface of the sea.

"Freeze Bullet!"

The bolt of light struck the water, instantly turning a portion of the sea into a block of ice. I began chanting the same spell again, aiming toward the pirate ship, which was beginning to lag behind. The shadow was closing in on their vessel.

Through the water, the darkness grew more intense. It pushed up the seawater—and then, *G-RIT.*

The sound of something hitting the hull and then—*JABAAAAN!*

With a thunderous roar, the seawater and the pirate ship were smashed to pieces.

What emerged from the wreckage of water and wood was something that could only be described as a monstrosity. Its size was that of a Great Sea Serpent. At the end of its long, undulating black body—like a giant snake—were dozens and dozens of human faces, each the size of a man’s torso, plastered onto the flesh.

I felt as though those countless eyeless eyes were looking right at me. At me, standing atop the floating ice.

That was the moment I had been waiting for. The instant I could land a guaranteed hit. When it attacked the ship and exposed its body above the surface.

Naturally, the pirate ship I used as bait was empty by then. The crew and I had already moved onto the icebergs I created with the cold spells.

"Over here, too!"

Standing on the iceberg, I released the spell I had been holding.

"——Dragon Slave!"

The former pirate boss shouted. The light shattered the head of the black serpent.

"Did... did we get it...?" Captain Virgo asked.

"Without a doubt," I replied.

The undulations of the headless giant and the explosion created violent waves, tossing our unstable iceberg. I was thrown into the sea, cutting off my words. I had been prepared for it, but the impact was harder than I expected. The taste of salt filled my mouth. The sea roared.

"Are you okay?" someone called out.

In the dark water, for a split second, my eyes caught it clearly. A long, black, massive body, headless, sinking into the darkness of the abyss.

Someone grabbed my flailing hand and pulled me up. They swam to a nearby iceberg and hauled me onto it. I managed a nod to Captain Virgo's inquiry.

"Everyone’s here on this side!" Tania called out from another piece of ice.

From somewhere far, far away, a sound reached us. Like a low animal growl. A cry that sounded like it was enduring agony.

".....What was that.....? That voice.....?" the Captain muttered.

An idea flashed through my mind. I felt the water clinging to my skin suddenly grow colder.

As I crawled up onto the iceberg, I spoke. ".....This is just..... a theory of mine, but....."

I felt like it might be something better left unsaid. But if this theory was right—

"---What is it?" the Captain asked, urging me on.

".....It’s just a thought, but..... what if that thing... was actually just a single tentacle, and the main body is much, much bigger... and it’s still out there in the deep... and that sound just now was its cry of pain? I'd really hate that."

The Captain stood still on the iceberg for a long time, staring out toward the open sea.

".....Let’s go home. To dry land," he whispered. "This place... this sea... isn't a place where humans belong."

His voice was slightly raspy. I wonder if that was just because of the cold from the ice.

The vast, infinite ocean. To humanity, it was an unknown realm. But there is no guarantee that what exists beyond the unknown is "hope."

“So, What ever happened to them?” While bringing a piece of steamed chicken with peanut sauce to her mouth, Naga the White Serpent—my self-proclaimed rival—asked in a carefree tone. We had run into each other by chance in a certain port town and were currently sharing a meal. I had started telling this story to pass the time while waiting for our food.

"Who knows," I said, swallowing some potato salad and giving a small shrug. "It’s just a memory now. I can talk about it like this today, but at the time, it was no laughing matter. As for what happened to the former pirates, or if Captain Virgo gave up on

treasure hunting for good... honestly, I didn't have the mental energy to care about that."

"I even had dreams for a while after that—about being attacked by an unidentified creature with a bunch of black tentacles."

"Hmph. To be frightened by a creature of that level... you really are a coward, Lina Inverse."

For some reason, Naga looked triumphant. She waved her fork around.

"A long time ago, when I was researching Chimeras as a hobby, I tried making a black jellyfish with faces on the ends of its tentacles. It was actually quite cute in its own way."

"Don't group me in with—"

The words froze in my throat. A black jellyfish with faces on the ends of its tentacles?

C-Could it be...?

".....So, Naga..... what happened to that jellyfish?"

I asked the question with a dead, emotionless voice. She puffed out her chest.

"It grew much larger and faster than I expected, so from the standpoint of nature conservation, I returned it to the sea."

"‥‥‥That's not 'nature conservation'....."

The retort came half-unconsciously.

But... I'd like to think there's no way... surely there's no way *that* was the thing that grew so massive...

Regardless. I became too afraid to pursue the matter any further, so I simply punched Naga into silence.

(By the Shore of the Demon Sea: End)

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Regardless. I became too afraid to pursue the matter any further, so I simply punched Naga into silence.

(By the Shore of the Demon Sea: End)

Ghost Life [Part 1]

Only the sound of footsteps echoed in the darkness.

A sliver of moonlight leaked in through a square window cut into the stone wall. Decaying lumber and wind-blown withered leaves lay scattered across the floor along with the dust, giving off a damp odor.

The building stood in a place where one had to venture a bit into the mountains from a large city. It was a sturdy three-story stone structure. If it had been well-maintained, it was the sort of place that could have been called a manor. However, in its current ruined and rotted state, it was more fitting to call it an abandoned house. For some reason, the sounds of insects that had been present while we were outside could not be heard here. Only our footsteps—

"Stop."

I whispered and came to a halt.

"What is it, Lina?"

She spoke in a small voice, as if drawn in by my tone, and stopped in her tracks as well. The magical light lit at the tip of her sword illuminated her figure.

"Don't you hear it?"

Long black hair and a black cloak. Clothes with a senselessly high amount of exposed skin, and a skull necklace around her neck. This was Naga the White Serpent—my self-proclaimed rival, a walking indiscretion whose very existence was at the absolute limit. She was a traveling sorcerer like me who would appear without context just when I thought she had disappeared entirely—well, she was what you'd call a "cursed acquaintance."

Actually, it was none other than her who had brought in this job—a request to exorcise a ghost from an abandoned house. The request fee wasn't particularly high, and I had no real obligation to go along with something like this, but the chance of Naga taking a normal-looking request was something that happened maybe once every five years. I wanted to somehow make the job a success and use it as an opportunity to lead Naga onto the path of a decent human being. It was probably impossible, though.

As for my motivation, was it volunteer work? More like, it was just too annoying to deal with the complaining if I said I wouldn't go along.

After entering the problem house and searching here and there for a while—

"..... I hear it."

Naga whispered expressionlessly.

The wind blowing past the window carried the faint, distant sound of a woman's sobbing, creeping in through the broken panes.

We moved slowly toward the sound. The voice was coming from above. We walked down a long, long hallway and climbed the wooden stairs, which creaked and were slick with moisture. I wondered whose doing it was, but the walls were covered in red paint with crude graffiti:

forgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgi veme forgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgivemeforgiveme

.....Ignoring the poor-taste graffiti, we went up to the second floor.

The sobbing was gradually getting louder. There was a door at the end of a short hallway. The voice could be heard from behind the half-open door. It was there. Just ahead.

Silencing my footsteps, I approached and peeked inside through the gap in the door.

It was a dark room. It must have once had furniture covered in sheets, but now the white cloths were stripped away and the furniture was ransacked, scattered messily about—and there, beyond that.

In the corner of the room, a woman was huddling.

A white dress glowed faintly in the darkness. Her long black hair was messy and disheveled, and as she sat hunched over with her back to us, she was simply sobbing.

Right there—

"Don't you go wailing like that!!"

My Hyper Flying Kick exploded!

"Ngh-gweh!"

The impact felt more solid than I expected. The white woman let out a groan and fell forward, rubbing her face against the floor. She turned around toward us.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

The face that spoke had no eyes, no nose, and no mouth—it was a smooth mask. She must have scraped it just now; a part of the mask was torn, and the corner of a mouth peeked out from underneath. Her black wig was halfway shifted, and a bit of her natural blonde hair was visible.

No matter how biased a look one gave her, she didn't look like a ghost.

"..... Rather. What are *you* doing in a place like this? Hm?"

"..... B-But.....!"

Faced with my cold gaze, she sat down and crossed her arms with a defiant attitude.

"..... It doesn't really matter, but..... what kind of nerves do you have to suddenly deliver a jumping kick to a ghost?"

She spoke dismissively and ripped off the wig and mask. She looked a bit older than me. Her short blonde hair was exposed to the magical light.

"I wouldn't have used a jumping kick if I thought you were a ghost," I said. "I've seen plenty of ghosts up until now, so I can tell the difference. That dress of yours is just smeared with the juice of a Night-Glow plant or something anyway, isn't it?"

"Guh....."

She groaned again. It seemed I had hit the mark.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I knew that much, Lina Inverse! After all, this Naga the White Serpent....."

The Night-Glow plant. Just as its name implied, it was an insectivorous plant that used light to lure and catch nocturnal insects. They grew in the mountains around here, and I had seen quite a few of them just last night while I was beating up some bandits in the hills.

Ignoring her as she approached while talking big, I turned back toward the fake-ghost girl.

"Now then, first of all, why don't you let us hear your name?"

"..... Iara. Iara Ferguson."

"Well, you might have been able to trick someone who's never seen a ghost before."

"..... It looks like the other one was tricked, though."

"..... Eh."

When she said that, I turned around to see Naga peeking out from behind the half-open door with only half her face showing, watching the situation.

"..... Um..... having half your face peeking out in a place like this looks incredibly scary."

I waved my hand at her dismissively.

"Ah— Naga, this girl isn't a ghost. She's just a human pretending to be one."

"Naga, Flebitz was the client, right?"

"As expected of Lina Inverse, you remembered well! I had almost half-forgotten myself! Ho-ho!"

"Don't forget the client! This is a job *you* took on! If you forget stuff like that, how are we going to collect the final payment!?"

At her words, Naga and I couldn't help but look at each other.

"Wait a second. What's the meaning of that?"

"It's just a common story."

Faced with Naga's question, the girl lowered her gaze and looked away.

"The man my father borrowed money from, a guy named Flebitz, was a villain. It’s as simple as that."

Tracing the floor aimlessly with her fingertip, she spoke in a low voice.

"..... It seems that some digits were added to the loan contract. And the debt increased by two digits."

"Two digits!?"

I raised my voice unintentionally. That was... dynamic.

"Wait! Isn't that fraud!?"

Naga was indignant, but Iara simply gave a small shrug.

"Well, yeah. But if you can't prove it's fraud, it becomes an official document. So in the end, this house was snatched away too. Some people might say my father was at fault for being careless..... but even so, there's no doubt that Flebitz is the villain. So, as a small bit of revenge, I've been pretending to be a ghost here. If the word gets out that it's a haunted house, Flebitz won't be able to sell this place to anyone for a high price, right? ..... Well, I suppose you guys have a job to do, so feel free to tell Flebitz the truth..... but if you guys keep associating with a guy like that, you'll eventually see a bitter end."

"..... Hmm....."

I put my hand to my chin and thought. Of course, there was a possibility that everything she just told us was a made-up story. Either way—it seemed like we needed to verify a few things.

"It hasn't been solved at all!"

The moment he saw our faces, that man—Comas Flebitz—began hurling verbal abuse at us without listening to reason. He was a thin man over forty. He had thinning black hair and a nervous-looking gaze. His clothes were well-tailored, but because his physique was so poor, it looked like he was being wrapped in the clothes rather than wearing them.

Two days ago—Naga and I had visited him, reported that we had exorcised the ghost, and requested the balance. At that time, he had a gentlemanly face and said he would check and to wait a few days—but today we visited again, and this happened the moment we met.

"I had my people stay there, and they said the ghost appeared after all! Even if you call yourselves sorcerers, are you just little girls with nothing but talk!?"

They were likely bodyguards. He had two burly men positioned to his left and right, and he rattled on in a fierce tone without letting us get a word in.

I see. I pretty much understand now.

"Honestly, I never should have asked for this! Talking big with a cool face and saying 'I defeated it'! And then this is the result! Regardless, since you've failed, naturally the advance payment should be retur—"

"No."

Elmekia Lance!

Zubaba-shuh! ..... Batari.

The single strike of the spell I fired knocked down one of the bodyguards standing by Flebitz. Finally, he shut his mouth. When the other bodyguard tried to move, Naga stopped him with a glare.

"I slammed this same technique into the ghost," I said. I was telling a total lie in a calm tone. "It's a spell that deals damage to the spirit. Since you're a human, you'll just end up bedridden, but for an ordinary ghost, one shot means total annihilation."

The color of Flebitz's face had certainly changed as I spoke. I shook my head left and right.

"I just thought I had to prove I wasn't lying since you called us liars."

But the thing was, he didn't seem inclined to let us speak at all. So, I figured killing two birds with one stone was the quickest way, and I just gave him a live demonstration. Well, I suppose the best way to understand the power of a spell is to be the one who gets hit by it..."

"W-Wait! Fine, I get it!"

Repeating "I get it" several times as if to buy time, Flebitz continued, "I get it! I understand perfectly! My mistake for doubting you. I apologize for saying you lied. You clearly slammed that spell into the ghost. But... but, listen. Just listen to me without getting angry. It is a fact that my subordinates, whom I sent to check on the place,

saw the ghost. So... fine. I won't ask for the advance payment back anymore. My men have no reason to tell a lie like that. As for why it happened—I don't know the reason. Maybe it wasn't an ordinary ghost, or maybe there was more than one. However, regardless, the fact remains that your work was incomplete. I'm sure you understand, but the ghost extermination I requested means the complete eradication of the ghost. Since that wasn't achieved, the request is cancelled. I cannot pay the balance. Please accept that. If you say you can't accept it, then I'll have no choice but to have the officials intervene."

"......Hmm......"

Flebitz and I glared at each other in silence for a while. Eventually, I was the one who let out a sigh. Naga looked at me in surprise, but I ignored her. Shrugging my shoulders slightly, I spoke.

"I didn't intend to cut corners, but it's a fact that something was missed. It seems we just don't get along—so it's probably best to say goodbye here. Come on. Let's go, Naga."

Naga followed me in silence as I turned on my heel. In the end, Flebitz didn't say another word.

"Hmph. You're quite something, Lina! He reacted exactly the way you said he would!"

"I suppose so."

We exchanged those words on the way back to our inn after leaving Flebitz's house. I had told Naga beforehand that I was going to lie, and that Flebitz might complain to avoid paying the fee. I told her to just stay quiet and watch because I had a plan. If I hadn't, she—being the type who doesn't understand subtle psychological games—would likely have ruined everything by piping up with an unnecessary "Hey Lina, why are you telling such a lie?" at a critical moment.

By the way, the story Flebitz told about his subordinates seeing a ghost when they checked was, of course, a lie. He was shouting and pretending to be angry, but his veins weren't bulging and his face wasn't flushed—in short, he was faking it. Besides, I had the ultimate proof that it was a lie. There was no way a ghost could appear at that manor.

Because the ghost was currently at the inn.

"So, how did it go?"

The one who asked Naga and me that with a displeased look while still tied to a pillar in our room was the "ghost" herself—Iara. To verify Flebitz's character, we had her accompany us for the past two days. Let's just say we weren't using terms like "forced abduction" or "confinement."

The fact that she, the one who had been pretending to be the ghost, was right here was more than enough material to judge that Flebitz was lying. Well, I suppose we were both liars in this case. For example, if Flebitz hadn't lied and had paid the rest of the fee, I had intended to tell him the truth about Iara. There are plenty of cases where someone borrows money but tells their family a smaller amount, after all.

However, given the situation, her story started to seem much more credible.

"Well, anyway."

I shrugged slightly as I untied her ropes.

"I told him we 'saw' the ghost, so he said he wouldn't pay the fee. Talk about petty. If I had just kept listening quietly, he reached the point of demanding the advance payment back. If I'd stayed silent even longer, he probably would have started demanding a contract cancellation penalty. .....Well, it's a reaction I expected to a certain extent."

"That's just the kind of guy he is. Anyway, now you see that what I said was true, right?"

Iara puffed out her chest proudly, appearing unbothered by the treatment of being tied up.

"Well, I guess. So, the reason for us to stop you is gone. Do whatever you want with the ghost act or anything else."

"—Hey, in that case—"

She sent us a meaningful look and said, "Want to try a little prank?"

A thin mist hung over the area.

The manor, located slightly into the mountains from the big city, had been neglected for a while. Ransacked by people coming for a test of courage, it now presented the appearance of a ruin. Surrounded by mountain trees that cast long shadows, there was a garden overgrown with weeds, and beyond that, stone walls crawled with ivy. Even though it was the hour of sunlight, it wasn't a very pleasant place. It was even more so given that the place had become a bit of a local rumor as a "haunted house."

It was a time when the morning mist had not yet vanished. Two men entered the grounds and began cutting weeds, though they looked visibly jittery. They were likely gardeners—one older, one younger—hired by Flebitz after being told the ghost had already been exorcised. His plan was to fix up the house once the ghost was gone, strip away the "haunted" label, and sell it to someone. Well, it was a perfectly natural response on his part, but—

The younger one, who had been crouching while cutting grass, suddenly jolted upright and looked around frantically.

"..... Father..... did you hear that?" his trembling voice asked.

"Hear what?" the older man asked, not stopping his work as he bit into a piece of chewing tobacco.

Naturally, all that could be seen were the ruined house and the wild garden shrouded in white mist.

"Just now..... a woman's voice—"

"But....."

"Idiot!"

The older man barked at the younger one. "If you have time to tell stupid jokes, move your hands! Just shut up and work!"

".....Y-Yes....."

『*UNDERSTOOD.....*』

They both jolted and froze simultaneously. This time, they must have heard it clearly: a third voice, a woman's. The older man remained frozen, not even raising his eyes.

".....Y-You idiot, don't make voices like a woman....."

"It wasn't me..... could it be—"

Interrupting the younger man, the elder jumped to his feet.

"Idiot! Master Flebitz said the matter was settled! So it's already—"

There, the voice cut off. The grass rustled, swaying in the wind. The older man stood there with his eyes and mouth wide open. He was staring past the younger man—or rather, at something even further beyond him.

"Hey! Father, please stop with the jokes," the younger man said, but the elder gave no reaction. ".....Father?" Silence. "Um....." Silence.

Slowly, very slowly, the younger man turned around. Behind him—toward where the older man was staring.

In a corner of the garden, half-buried in weeds left to grow wild, stood a small white gazebo consisting of a roof atop stone pillars. A woman was standing there.

She wore a draggled one-piece dress that must have been pure white originally, but was now stained and smeared with reddish-brown spots. Long black hair hung down in front, hiding her face as she looked down. Time and the very air seemed to freeze. How long were they like that?

[.....]

The older man was the one who let out a raspy voice. "What..... are you doing.....? You..... in a place like this.....?"

Slowly. Slowly, slowly, the woman began to raise her face. From beneath the hair, a white chin appeared, then red lips. The corners of her mouth curled up into the shape of a smile. At the same time, her entire body seemed to warp subtly.

Suddenly, the woman's figure vanished.

"GYAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!?!?"

The two of them screamed in unison and, nearly collapsing from fear, fled as fast as their legs could carry them.

Watching the scene secretly, we were rolling around inside the manor, holding our stomachs and desperately stifling the laughter that threatened to leak out.

"......L-Lina..... it’s a bit too much....."

Naga, playing the ghost in her white dress, squeezed out the words while clutching her stomach. Of course, she wasn't wearing her usual fun items like the spiked shoulder guards or her cloak.

"......Rather, Naga..... you’re too good at this....."

I responded vaguely. I felt like if I let my guard down even a little, I’d burst into an explosion of laughter. Iara was actually lying face down, clutching her stomach and twitching with spasms.

Yes. After we severed ties with Flebitz, Iara brought us a proposal: why not try pretending to be ghosts once?

There was no reward in it, but the thought of the house being fixed up, sold for a high price, and that Flebitz making a fortune was just irritating. So, in the end, Naga and I went along with Iara's story, half for the fun of it and half for spite. Well, one could say it was none of our business, but—this was more fun than I expected.

I used wind spells to send voices from nowhere and used a setup combining crystal lenses and mirrors to project the image of Naga, dressed as a ghost in a distant spot, into the morning mist. If I removed the setup, Naga's figure would vanish right before the viewer's eyes. It was nothing more than a simple trick, but to those who didn't know, it seemed to look exactly like a ghost.

Additionally, the fact that Naga's appearance fit the role perfectly was a big factor.

Even though I knew it was mean..... I couldn't help but clutch my stomach at the way the gardeners fled.

"Hmph..... but Iara, you did well to procure clothes like these," Naga said to Iara, her fits of laughter finally subsiding, though her shoulders still shook slightly.

Iara, still collapsed and clutching her stomach, turned her gaze toward us.

"......Well..... there were plenty of them lying around behind the hospital attached to the temple."

Pffft!

the lingering traces of laughter vanished instantly, and Naga and I blurted out at the same time:

"Wait a minute!?" ".....Are these real!?"

As we panicked, Iara rolled around, slapping the floor with her palms.

That reaction was...

"——So, that was a lie?"

At my flat mutter, she finally burst out laughing.

"Ryah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah! ...My stomach... it hurts... my stomach...!"

"Hey! No jokes like that! Even someone like me, Naga the White Serpent, thought for a split second about seriously going to get an exorcism!"

Naga said, her eyes narrowing as her legs trembled slightly.

Exorcism...? You can use purification spells yourself, you know.

Iara was laughing so hard she was gasping for air.

"So... sorry... it’s okay... I just put some herbal tea stains on a cheap dress..."

I see. Now that she mentioned it, the color did look like that.

She finally sat up halfway.

"So? How was it? Your impressions of pretending to be a ghost?"

"Hmph. I wouldn't call it a noble hobby, but... it’s not bad."

"Yeah, it was way more fun than I thought. Well, I feel a bit sorry for those gardeners earlier, though."

We had severed ties with Flebitz. My heart didn't ache one bit if this place got a bad reputation for being haunted. That was why I’d gone along with it.

However, that was when I first learned that the number of people in the world who come for a "test of courage" was much higher than I had imagined. If no one to scare

had shown up for two or three days, Naga and I would probably have grown bored of waiting and quit the ghost game.

But that wasn't the case.

Unless it rained, people came for a test of courage almost every single night—sometimes three or four groups in a single night.

Iara leaned in and whispered to us. Like a demon.

"Then, why don't we keep doing this every now and then?"

When she said that, Naga and I looked at each other.

I knew it was a twisted hobby. But sometimes, those are the things that become the most fun once you get hooked.

So, to make a long story short—the ghost game played by me, Naga, and Iara continued even now. Of course, one reason was that it was fun once we tried it, but another big reason was that there was no reason to stop. Neither Naga nor I had a particularly clear purpose for our travels. Furthermore, before I came to this city, I had crushed about two bandit gangs and confiscated their valuables, so my pockets were warm. In other words, I was fine without working for the time being.

As for the owner of the mansion, it was that nasty Flebitz who had swindled the house from Iara's parents.

People would come to a place rumored to have ghosts for a test of courage, then say things like, "A ghost really appeared. I've had enough of such scary things." I sometimes thought, *Then don't go in the first place, you morons.* But unlike the gardeners we scared at first, there was no reason to hesitate in scaring these thrill-seekers.

We rested at the inn during the daylight hours, getting excited about what trick to use next, and at night we went to the mansion and waited eagerly for the "courage-test" idiots.

After spending about ten days living that "straight-to-the-path-of-becoming-useless-people" kind of life:

"—They're here, they're here, they're here!"

It was shortly after the sun had set that Iara came into the back room where we were waiting, killing her voice and footsteps. Since the only light in the room was a lantern, I couldn't see the color of her face, but her expression looked genuinely happy from the bottom of her heart.

She held up two fingers and said playfully, "We have two guests~"

"Let’s see, then."

"Hmph. I wonder what kind of crowd they are."

Naga, already in her ghost costume, and I were stationed in a back room on the third floor. We both went out into the hallway and peeked outside through a window where the wooden shutters had fallen off. It was a perfect lookout spot because the lantern light from the room didn't reach it, yet we could see the front gate clearly. There was a faint residue of sunlight in the western sky, but the moon and stars now ruled the heavens.

I peered through the moonlight and starlight. I couldn't see the fine details, but I could clearly tell that one of the silhouettes was strangely rugged.

"Does that guy on one side... look like he’s wearing armor?" I whispered to Naga.

"Now that you mention it... I get that feeling too," Naga muttered while squinting.

As we watched the two figures standing there, perhaps hesitating whether to enter or not, it happened suddenly.

A flash of light scorched the darkness.

A magical light had appeared beside the two standing figures. It illuminated a warrior-type figure clad in armor, scale mail, and a helmet, and a priest-type figure in a green robe and hat. I couldn't tell much about the warrior because of the helmet, but the priest looked to be in his mid-twenties. The light had likely been released by him.

".....Wow... that's some heavy-duty equipment for a test of courage," Iara whispered in a hushed voice.

I kept my voice low as well. "Listen... those guys probably aren't hobbyists who came for a test of courage. They're professionals hired by Flebitz."

"Ghost exterminators."

"Eeeeeeeeh!?"

"—Quiet, you idiot!"

They must have heard her voice. The two standing figures looked up. I scrambled to cover her mouth with my hand, but of course, it was too late. They probably couldn't see us, but we pulled back from the window and hid.

".....Did you hear that..... that voice just now....."

"Yeah..... Wait for us, ghosts..... I'll drive you out of this world immediately!"

The voices of the men talking reached us, carried by the wind. They must have thought Iara's scream was the voice of a ghost.

And so, the men began walking toward the mansion.

(Ghost Life: To be continued)

Next Episode Preview:

The professional exterminators have finally arrived! How will Lina Inverse greet them!? Will Lina and the others be able to safely continue their days as ghosts!? Or will they receive a purification spell from the exterminators and become decent human beings!? What the heck are they doing this time!?

Anyway, next time: *Ghost Life* [Part 2]! Don't miss it!

Summary

Near a certain large city. Lina and Naga, who were asked to exorcise a ghost from a mansion, head there only to find a girl named Iara Ferguson pretending to be the ghost. She tells them that Flebitz, the man who brought the request to Lina and the others, swindled this mansion from her, and she is pretending to be a ghost as revenge. While the truth of the matter remains unknown, Lina and Naga, having

witnessed Flebitz's pettiness, part ways with him and join Iara in her ghost game. But then, a priest and a warrior newly hired by Flebitz arrive for a "ghost extermination"!

Ghost Life [Part 2]

The creak of a heavy door echoed. Footsteps quietly resonated in the distance.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are we going to do!?"

"Hmph! A foolish question, Iara! It’s already been decided!"

Naga puffed out her chest grandly toward the frantic Iara.

"An intruder with ill intent must be removed by force!"

"No, wait, Naga, be calm. In this case, 'intruder with ill intent' refers to *us*."

At my point, Naga and Iara were silent and frozen for a moment. Then, they slapped their hands together simultaneously.

『*——Now that you mention it.*』

『*Ah.*』

...Well... it’s true... people sometimes get angry while ignoring their own position.

Despite the various circumstances, we were the ones who had entered someone else's house without permission to play a ghost game.

"Then..... shall we run away quietly?"

Why do you look so dissatisfied, Iara?

"Hm!....."

I tilted my head for a moment—

"Well, it’s true that just running away lacks style. ♡"

I said, giving the two of them a wink.

The swinging light of a lantern illuminated the surroundings. Treading on the stone floor, the two men were heading toward the back of the mansion.

『.....*It’s quite ruined.*』

One of them grumbled, and the other—the one in front carrying the lantern, who looked like a priest—answered curtly.

I was checking on their progress while stationed in the back room on the third floor.

Mixed in with the trash scattered in the hallways and rooms, I had set up gadgets combining mirrors and crystal lenses. Through these, I was able to get a rough idea of the situation from this room. It was almost the same logic as when I showed the fake ghost to the gardeners before.

...Of course, I couldn't see everything clearly. All I could tell was the general movement of the opponents. But that was enough.

Basically, the setup was that Naga and Iara, dressed as ghosts, would scare the "guests," and I would send a signal if anything happened. Furthermore, I was using wind-based spells so that their voices would reach me.

The wind carried the voice of the man who looked like a warrior.

"Hey. Instead of a lantern, don't you feel like putting up magical lights here and there like you did earlier? There’s trash rolling around everywhere, and it’s damn hard to walk."

"Endure it," the priest said curtly.

"Ghosts have a tendency to appear in dark places, you see. If we light up the whole area and the ghost doesn't show, we won't be able to finish the job, and that would be a waste of time, wouldn't it?"

"......Well, I guess that’s true, but....."

Actually, I’m the same way.....

"Anyway, you definitely saw it, right?"

The priest walked over toward the window.

"Yeah. If that wasn't a ghost just now, then there’s a woman flying around this area upside down."

Full marks for the Warrior-kun.

Actually, just now, Naga—who was outside—had used a levitation spell to float upside down and cross in front of the window.

The Warrior grumbled as he presumably looked around the area.

"Don't scare me like that, you idiot!"

And then.

"GYAAAHHHHHHHH!" "UWAHHHHHHH!"

The Warrior screamed, and the Priest screamed too.

To the Priest’s scolding, the Warrior replied in a panicked voice:

"Just! Now! Outside the window! A woman's head crossed by upside down! Just like *whoosh*!"

Of course, by the time the Priest looked out the window, Naga had long since moved to a spot where she couldn't be seen.

"You! That’s the ghost, isn't it?! Don't come here for a ghost extermination and get scared by the ghost!"

"I’m fine with ghosts, but I hate being caught off guard!"

.....Well, it’s true. There are surprisingly many people who are fine with ghosts in theory but hate "ghost-story" developments or being startled.

".....It’s gone now..... went somewhere else. Is the garden part of its territory too? Or did it just make it look like it passed outside the window....."

The Priest muttered, and the Warrior asked:

"So, what are we going to do?"

"What do you mean 'what'? We have to search. It won't end until we purify it directly. If you see it before I do, let me know. Only this time, without the screaming."

"..............Fine, I get it....."

The Warrior muttered bitterly at the Priest's irony.

".....Now..... it just passed the end of the hallway....."

He said it with almost no pause. That was probably Iara.

"Is it true!?"

"Why would I lie about that?"

"Right..... Let’s go."

The two of them proceeded down the hallway—

"It moved upstairs!"

The footsteps apparently came from above. I didn't know if it was Naga or Iara, but they were certainly enthusiastic. Behind the two men as they turned back and ran up the stairs, a faint woman's laughter echoed.

"What’s going on? Is there... more than one of them!?"

"I don't know. Maybe there are two or more, or maybe one is just constantly moving around. Anyway, let’s search."

The two of them started moving again.

The other side believed we were ghosts, and we knew the other side were professionals. Usually, ghosts are thought to follow a specific pattern, even if they seem to be acting irrationally. If one can see through that, it’s possible to anticipate a ghost's movements. Naturally, a professional who knows this would end up anticipating a normal ghost’s behavior—which results in an "anticipation" pattern.

Therefore, it was easy to outwit them.

It was outside my calculations that Iara would invite us to play ghost together, and it was even further outside my calculations that we would get so hooked on such a game.

And there was one more thing outside my calculations.

Iara passed behind the two who went upstairs thinking they had read the ghost's move, letting out a sobbing sound. Then, in the entrance hall on the first floor looking down from the second, Naga beckoned them silently. To the backs of the two as they ran down the stairs, I sent a voice carried by a wind spell: 『*NOT THAT WAY.*』

Lured and pulled by our voices and movements, they moved up, down, forward, and back. By the time the two of them had traversed the entire mansion, the three of us had used flight spells from the roof and made a quick getaway.

There were many miscalculations. No, for this incident, it’s fair to say there were too many.

It was expected that Flebitz would try to stingy out on the fee for Naga and me. It was also within my thoughts that Iara would continue pretending to be a ghost as a way of getting back at him.

But.

"How about it? Won't you try exterminating the mansion's ghost one more time?"

Comas Flebitz sat down in an empty seat without asking and spoke with an incredibly arrogant attitude. It seemed Flebitz had become more obsessed with this than I had expected.

It was the afternoon of the fourth day since the Priest and Warrior pair had first visited the mansion when he and his two bodyguards showed up at the dining hall on the first floor of the inn. By the way, Iara wasn't in the dining hall; she was waiting in the room Naga and I had taken.

"I have plenty of complaints."

It wasn't by chance. I was having her stay out of sight as much as possible. If Iara, who had been swindled out of the mansion, was seen hanging around while the ghost rumors were the talk of the town, someone might realize it was a prank by her (and us).

Thanks to those steady efforts, Flebitz didn't seem to realize that Naga and I were the ones behind the ghost commotion. However, the fact that he came back to us after we had parted on bad terms suggested he was desperate to do something about that "ghost."

"What did you say?" Flebitz asked.

"I mean that contract is over. You're the one who ended it. Bringing up a contract you terminated just when it suits you, and talking in such a convenient, patronizing way... of course I have complaints."

"B-But, the fact remains that you failed the job, didn't you?"

I wanted to deny it, but I couldn't exactly say that out loud.

"I don't think it’s a bad deal? It’s a chance for you to clear the name you tarnished with your previous failure. We'll treat it as a continuation of the previous request, and once the work is done, I'll properly pay the half-payment I promised."

As he rattled on with his selfish sleep-talk, I swallowed the steamed chicken in my mouth, silenced him with a sharp glare, and said:

"First of all. Don't just come to a table where someone is eating, sit down, and start talking without permission. And one more thing. You’re the one who said the request was cancelled because of a failure. And we accepted that. If you want us to work now because you'll pay half the fee, that means the fact is you're asking us to work for half the original price!!"

To explain that Flebitz had made groundless accusations to haggle over the price—I would have to talk about Iara, but of course, that would be nothing but digging my own grave.

I said with a composed face, "True. But it’s also a fact that the request ended once."

Flebitz clenched his teeth. "......! .....Are you planning to take advantage of me because you know I'm having trouble with that ghost.....?"

"Hmm. So you *are* having trouble."

Chewing on cabbage without much enthusiasm, I continued.

"The guys you have hired now seem to be making an effort, but because the opponent moves all over the place, they can't seem to corner it. You need more manpower, but there’s no point in increasing the number of people who can't do anything against a ghost. Since it’ll be a form of reinforcement, it should be easier than last time."

".....By the way, Naga, that herb-steamed duck we ordered hasn't come yet, has it?"

"Hmph. Now that you mention it, that’s right. Doesn't it take some time?"

Ignoring his nonsense, we worried about the food.

Flebitz, with veins popping on his forehead, said, ".....I understand. Then let’s make a new contract. The same amount as before, half in advance and half later—how about that?"

"Whoa, Naga, this slow-cooked beef is not delicious at all, so don't eat it. I'll dispose of it all for you."

"Hey.....! Wait, Lina! You can't just try to hog it all with a lie like that!"

".....Ugh.....!"

Flebitz's face turned red with anger. "Fine! I'll pay double!"

"Double?"

Hey, Naga, don't react.

"That’s quite a bold move, I suppose..... but it’s not a matter of the amount," I said, without even looking at him.

".....Still not enough?"

"Like I said—"

I waved my wooden fork around. "When I said I had plenty of complaints, you should have realized. It’s not about the money, it’s about trust. I have no intention of ever taking a request from you again. That’s what it means."

"H-How insolent!"

"If you don't like being met with an insolent attitude, you should learn some manners yourself first."

Flebitz was red-faced for a while, but he probably hadn't forgotten how easily I had taken down his bodyguards before.

"We're leaving!"

Declaring that grumpily, he stomped out of the shop without giving us another glance.

".....Lina, weren't you rubbing him the wrong way a bit too much?" Naga asked in a small voice before the swinging door had even stopped.

"Well. Considering what we're doing, I couldn't exactly take a job like that. I did consider for a second taking the job in name only and then sabotaging it from the inside, but... doing that much is a bit rude..."

If the opponent were an unspeakable villain, that might be an option, but for now, Flebitz was just a petty person. Well, if there was proof for Iara's story about the alteration of the loan contract, he'd be treated as a mid-level villain.

"Anyway, it's certain that Flebitz has become quite serious. We have to think about how to respond."

Naga just stuffed a shrimp into her mouth in silence.

Night arrived again. The time of the ghosts.

When the sun set behind the western mountains and the color of darkness soaked into the entire world, six shadows stood before the entrance.

"The number increased!"

Peeking down secretly from the third-floor window, Iara and I whispered in unison.

Standing near the gate were the two familiar silhouettes plus four more. I couldn't tell exactly who they were in the dark, but it was certain they weren't amateurs.

"W-What's going on, what's going on?"

"Calm down, Iara. I told you, right? That Flebitz was looking for various people."

"I heard that! But it's six people! Six! And of all times, Naga-san is gone somewhere.....!"

Then.

"Light!"

Naga's resonant voice came from the direction of the gate.

Just like the night the Priest and Warrior first visited—but even more brilliantly—a magical light flared at the gate.

Illuminated by the light were the young Priest and Warrior, Flebitz himself, two bodyguards, and—Naga the White Serpent in her usual strange clothes!

".....Wait, she’s over there!?"

".....Ah....."

Iara was frantic, and I felt drained.

"Don't 'ah' me, what is that!?"

"I don't know. Don't ask me."

"But she’s your friend!"

"She is NOT!"

I denied that with all my strength.

"Maybe she’s pretending to be Flebitz's ally to snatch the fee and sabotage them from the inside—or maybe she intended that at first but completely forgot and genuinely switched sides."

".....Either way, isn't she just a useless person.....?"

".....What exactly did you think Naga was? You can tell just by looking at her usual outfit."

I muttered, completely exasperated.

"—Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Rest easy, Comas Flebitz! Even without Lina, with the power of Naga the White Serpent, a ghost is nothing but a trifle!"

Naga’s voice reached us, riding the wind.

Naga and Flebitz’s group stepped into the mansion——

『A washbasin!』『It is a washbasin, isn’t it.』『Yeah. A washbasin.』『But why?』『Who knows.』

The other five spoke up one after another——

Passing through the entrance hall, they headed into the cluttered hallway. Flebitz seemed to be saying something in response, but I couldn't hear him from where I was.

"We can't let our guard down, but..... you don't need to worry that much," I said to Iara.

"Whether Naga is aiming to stir up trouble from the inside or has genuinely betrayed us, she shouldn't have told Flebitz about us. If she did, it would mean she knew and didn't stop us, which would have gotten the request cancelled already. I considered the possibility that things would turn out like this, to be honest, so I took a few measures."

"Now that you mention it, you did seem to be doing a lot of things....."

From the moment Flebitz visited and Naga's attitude turned strange, I had kept this outcome in my sights and made several moves.

Knowing nothing of this.

『*Hmph. I don't know how much of a ghost we're dealing with here, but——*』 Naga's proud words, delivered to me via a wind spell, were cut short by a——

GON!

A wooden washbasin that had suddenly dropped from above flattened her with ease.

Naga likely realized this was a trap I had set, but she couldn't exactly blurt that out right away.

『*That didn't happen when we were here,*』 the Warrior and the Priest said.

『*Does it mean the spirit is that much angrier?*』

Naga twitched for a few moments, then—*GABAH!*—she shoved the washbasin aside and sat up.

『*It is a poltergeist!*』

『*Ohhh!*』

The five men let out voices of admiration at Naga’s analysis.

A poltergeist. A phenomenon where spirits move objects like furniture. But.

No way. The truth was simply the traps I had set. Various traps I had camouflaged among the scattered trash and debris.

Of course, Naga knew. She knew the ghosts were actually us, and she knew the surveillance eyes—a combination of mirrors and crystals—were watching them. Given that, the fact that they were using lanterns instead of magical light..... was it a sign she was helping us? Or was she simply playing along with Flebitz's group?

There were six of them—though Flebitz and his two guards were likely just there to watch Naga and the others work, so they didn't really count toward the total. Either way, I was going to proceed as planned.

"Are..... are we going to be okay.....?" asked Flebitz, his knees already shaking.

At that moment.

——GO BACK——

I sent my voice through a wind spell.

『*Over here!*』

The Warrior lunged forward and threw open the door to the room where the voice had come from—

DOGOSHA-JAJA-SHARYI!

"AAAHH!"

A bucket filled with gravel—a very classic "poltergeist" trick—dropped from the top of the half-open door, scoring a direct hit and knocking him flat.

『*O..... O-cursed poltergeist! I will not forgive this!*』

He let out a roar of fury and scrambled to his feet.

『*.....I understand perfectly now, Poltergeist! If that’s how you want to play it, then I’ll show you what I can do!*』

Naga delivered a high-pitched declaration of war. By now, she was likely being serious rather than just acting. She turned back toward Flebitz and the others.

『*To the third floor! Stop cowering and let's go!*』

『*The third floor.....? Why there? Do you mean that's the true haunt of the ghost!?*』

『*If so, how can you tell!?*』

When asked by the Warrior and Priest, Naga spoke with utter, shameless confidence.

『*Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! For someone of my caliber, once a ghost makes two or three moves, I can tell where its base of operations is! Now, let's go!*』

She barked the command and started moving before they could even reply. Though they were clearly skeptical, the other five followed after her for the time being.

Iara, hearing this, began to panic. "He-hey, this is bad! They're coming straight here!"

"Calm down. I expected they'd come here eventually. I've set traps all over the place. While they're busy receiving the 'poltergeist' welcome—"

『*Damu Brass!*』

Naga's voice, casting a spell, cut my words short. A heartbeat later, a thunderous noise echoed. *GO-DOKA-DOKAGASHA-GOCHIGOTSU!*

"——Tch. She got me!" I clicked my tongue instinctively.

"W-What happened?"

"She broke the traps. Not all of them, though."

I tore off my wig and grabbed the ghost supplies I had laid out, quickly wrapping them in a cloth bundle.

I had made the right choice leaving my usual shoulder guards at the inn. If I had been wearing them, I wouldn't have been able to squeeze through. That was the size of the window we were dealing with.

I chanted a spell while thrusting my upper body through the modest window.

Outside the window was the night sky. In the wind smelling of the forest, an owl was hooting somewhere.

The sound of footsteps climbing the stairs. Then, from the second floor, the sound of Naga casting a spell and a trap activating.

I activated the levitation spell, pulled my lower body out of the window, and floated softly into the empty air.

"Iara! The luggage first! Then you!"

Following my instructions in silence, she first pushed the bundle of ghost gear out the window, and after I caught it, she leaned out herself. I wrapped one arm around the bundle and the other around her, aiming for the window one floor down.

I considered just flying away like that, but if Naga and the others found that neither I nor Iara were in the usual room, there was a high chance they would search outside from the windows. If that happened, we'd be sitting ducks for attack spells. For now, I climbed inside through the second-floor window.

It was likely the room directly beneath the one we always used. I released the spell and was just about to give Iara her next set of instructions when—!

GAGO-WAAAHNN!

A spectacular explosion erupted overhead, and the ceiling rained down as rubble!

"What a flashy poltergeist," the Warrior's voice said, sounding so close I didn't even need the wind spell to hear it.

Rubble wasn't the only thing that came down. A silhouette followed—along with an ear-piercing, idiotic laugh!『*Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You thought you could outsmart me, but you're too naive! Ghosts!*』

That triumphant declaration was made, naturally, by Naga the White Serpent, standing tall as she landed! She had realized we had escaped downstairs and used an attack spell to blow a hole straight through the floor she was standing on just to take a shortcut.

She was reckless. If things had gone poorly, someone's lantern could have shattered and started a fire, which would have been a disaster. Regardless, it seemed that didn't

happen; a few people had landed on their behinds, but they managed to scramble back up safely.

"The spirit hates that I'm getting close to it!"

Then, illuminated by the light of their lanterns——

"Y-You are.....?"

There stood I, in my white ghost outfit, with the long black hair of the wig spilling out from the unraveled bundle.

『*Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! So that was it! Lina Inverse! Iara Ferguson!*』

".....What.....?"

As Naga triumphed in a somewhat monotone voice, Flebitz and his two bodyguards looked shaken. Naga continued, unbothered.

『*So you two were pretending to be ghosts to scare whoever came by! However! While you might fool the eyes of amateurs, this.....*』

"Wa—Wait a minute!"

The person who cut short her boasting was, for some reason, Flebitz. "Iara..... who did you say.....?"

『*Hmph. Like I said——*』 Naga brushed her hair back and continued, 『*That Iara Ferguson right there—wait, huh?*』

Before I knew it, the figure of Iara, who should have been standing there, was nowhere to be seen.

"——Hey Lina, where's Iara?"

"What are you talking about!!" Flebitz's voice turned hysterical again. He was likely shaken by the sudden mention of the name of the person he had a guilty conscience toward.

I decided my only option was to press that point and somehow bluff my way through. I pretended to give up and scratched the back of my head.

".....Ah, fine. I was invited by a girl named Iara who used to live here, and she asked me to play ghost with her. That’s the story."

"That’s a lie!"

"No..... why would I lie about that....."

"It has to be a lie! Iara..... Iara Ferguson..... is long dead....."

『*What*.....』

Naga and I both groaned instinctively.

The air in the room froze. ——Somewhere, an owl was hooting——

It happened about two months ago. If one asked around town even a little, a story like that could be discovered immediately.

Iara Ferguson and her family, driven from the mansion, had set out with their well-worn furniture on a rickety cart pulled by an old horse——taking only the things that didn't seem likely to fetch a price. But on a mountain path facing a cliff along the way, a wheel on the cart broke, and the entire family fell——

A few days after the incident at the mansion, I made my way to the north side of the city.

The greenery of the mountains and the edges of the fields blended together here, and compared to the city center, the houses were quite sparse.

In the backyard of one house, a woman was hanging out laundry.

At my call, she turned her gaze toward me.

"——Lina-san——!"

The person who spoke in a strained voice was a blonde woman slightly older than me.

It was her—the one who had called herself Iara Ferguson and roped Naga and me into the ghost game.

Naturally, she wasn't a ghost. Her real name was Melanie Simon. She was very much alive.

When Naga blew a hole through the ceiling with an attack spell, she had used the confusion to slip away and escape alone. Finding her out wasn't particularly difficult.

".....So you found out. About me."

"Well, yeah. Once time passed and I calmed down, I figured it wasn't the work of someone using Iara's name, but rather someone who actually knew her."

As I spoke, Melanie put the half-hung laundry back into the washbasket and faced me, her shoulders slumped. I scratched my head.

"When I asked the townspeople with that in mind, I heard that Iara had long black hair, and I also heard about a woman who used to come to the mansion to help out. Someone of the same generation as Iara, with blonde hair——namely, you. I used to think the only reason you wore a wig was because it looked scarier that way—but in truth, you, with your different hair color and length, had to wear a wig to pose as Iara's ghost."

"I suppose so," Melanie said with a wry smile.

It seemed Naga had also been weak to "ghost-story" developments despite being fine with ghosts, as she was currently collapsed at the inn from the shock. Thanks to that revelation, Flebitz and the others had even forgotten to complain to me before they went home.

"Before Iara's family lost the house, I used to go there often to help out with various things..... At the very least, I considered Iara a friend. But when I heard from her that her home was stolen, and then after that thing happened... that's why.....

I thought that if I pretended to be Iara and scared him a bit, Flebitz might reflect on himself, or something like that, but....."

".....What does that mean?"

"Who knows."

I shrugged my shoulders once again.

"Maybe Flebitz had much thinner nerves than we thought—and at this rate, Flebitz has probably realized the lie, too."

According to what I heard, it seems he thought the same thing: *'Someone just used Iara's name. There were no ghosts to begin with. I'll prove it.'* He declared that, stayed in the mansion himself—

"I hear he's currently bedridden."

".....Bedridden?"

"When he didn't return the next day, his servants went to the mansion and found him collapsed with his two bodyguards, foaming at the mouth. He's been that way ever since."

".....I see...."

Melanie looked toward the distant sky. Toward where Iara's mansion stood.

"She was there all along....."

Later, I heard a rumor. That a single haunted house stands in the mountains, a short distance from a certain large city. It is a place that the townspeople rarely approach, but amidst that, only one blonde woman occasionally visits the mansion to look after it.

I'll keep the name of the city a secret.

Perhaps Iara really was in that mansion—

I gave a small shrug.

"I suppose so."

Thinking back on it now. When we were pretending to be ghosts at the mansion, there were times when guests were being scared at moments that would have been a bit difficult for just the three of us to manage. At the time, I simply thought, *'I don't know if it's Naga or Iara, but one of them sure is enthusiastic.'*

Of course, it could just be that I'm overthinking it, and one of them really was just working hard. I have no intention of trying to verify that now.

The Threat of the Underground Kingdom [Part 1]

That incredibly fancy shop was located deep in the mountains, far from any human settlement. It happened during my aimless travels. In search of rare, delicious mushrooms, I had ventured deep into the mountains and lost my way. Crossing valleys with flight spells, I had no idea how far I had gone. Pushing through thickets even off the animal trails, it suddenly appeared before my eyes.

The entire shop was painted in pastel colors, and the large sign hanging above featured rounded characters I didn't recognize and couldn't read.

Looking around, thinking I might have stumbled upon a mountain village, I found nothing else—not a settlement, not even a shack. The building was well-maintained, certainly not a ruin. The large door and windows remained closed. I couldn't see inside, but based on the construction, it was some kind of shop.

However..... in a place like this where no customers were likely to come, what kind of business could they be running?

I hesitated for a moment—but in the end, curiosity won out, and I gently placed my hand on the shop door. With the cool ring of a doorbell, the door opened without any resistance.

"Welcome! ♡"

A bright smile. Dressed in an apron dress, her long black hair tied back with a pink headband—it was Naga.

I slammed the door shut, spun on my heel, and immediately started to dash away at full speed. Before I could get away, someone's hand grabbed me firmly by the back of my collar. From behind the door that had opened once more, a voice spoke to me.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Now that you've seen it, I won't let you escape, Lina Inverse....."

"Uwah-hyah-eeeeeeeeee!"

She dragged me, struggling, into the shop. The door shut with a *click*.

As long as a person continues to live in this world, there are a few things they cannot avoid. For example—terrible acquaintances.

Those who wear unnecessarily revealing clothes, spiked shoulder guards, and skull necklaces year-round, laughing like idiots at every opportunity. They call themselves your rival without permission, scrounge meals, and cause incidents. If you're sitting there thinking such a creature couldn't possibly exist, your experience in life is still quite shallow. They exist. Definitely.

Naga the White Serpent—that is the name of that creature.

"I mean..... why are you dressed like that..... you....."

Inside the shop where I had been dragged, I asked that of Naga, who was dressed in an odd—rather, an unusually normal—outfit. Perhaps intending to prevent my escape, she continued to hold the back of my collar over her shoulder even as we faced each other.

"Hmph. Is there some problem with me wearing this outfit?"

At her words, spoken with utter nonchalance, my righteous anger exploded!

"Of course there is! If some innocent person saw you looking like that and misunderstood you for a normal person, what would you do!?"

"Wait, Lina, what is that supposed to mean!?"

"I'm saying it's best for Naga to act like Naga! Even snakes have venom, and wasps have colorful stripes!"

"That's an irritating comparison."

"Anyway! Why has it come to this? ....."

As I spoke, I looked around the shop—and knit my brows.

Because the windows were closed, no sunlight entered, but the shop was sufficiently bright thanks to the light-stones embedded here and there. The interior was fancy, with fancy furniture to match the exterior. If the goods on display were stuffed animals, it would have been perfect—but on the lemon-yellow table stood a large axe

crossed in an X. On the pink shelves were small suits of armor and helmets. Every single item was old and decaying, stained with the colors of rust, dirt, and grass.

"..... What is this..... shop.....?"

It was a collection of old weapons and armor of various sizes.

"Hmph. Can't you tell just by looking?"

At her words, I looked around the shop once more, thought for a second, and said, ".....A specialty shop for equipment looted from corpses?"

"No such shop exists! This place is—"

The reason Naga cut her words short was clear without being told. Outside the shop. A presence and a single set of footsteps were approaching.

Naga moved. Pulling me by the collar she still held, she leaped behind the counter in a single bound. She threw me into a cupboard there and shut the door. Taking all those actions in an instant, Naga spun on her heel inside the counter.

Toward the shop's entrance. The doorbell rang.

"Welcome! ♡"

Naga’s overly cheerful greeting.

Through the narrow slits in the cupboard door—likely for ventilation—I saw it. An Orc, carrying a huge sack on its back, stepped into the shop.

There are probably very few people who haven't heard the name 'Orc.' They are a type of humanoid often mentioned alongside Goblins and Kobolds; they have a certain level of intelligence and culture, but basically, they are treated as pests. To a veteran warrior or a seasoned sorcerer like myself, they are nothing but small frys.

The Orc wandered around the shop for a bit, picked up a hatchet, and made a sound toward Naga.

"Vugg-gog-gogg-bubu."

It was likely their language. However, I didn't know the meaning. Naga, with her hands on her hips, replied:

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho."

"Gugovv?"

"Ho-ho-ho."

"Vugg. Gogg-bugu."

The Orc put the hatchet back, picked up a large dagger instead, and nodded once with satisfaction at Naga's idiotic laughter, bringing the dagger to the counter.

'.....She's communicating.....'

The conversation was actually getting through! Setting aside the fact that Naga was conversing with non-humans through idiotic laughter—this situation was just unreasonable!

While I was processing this absurdity in my heart, Naga wrapped the dagger in white lace and finished it with a pink ribbon. The Orc placed the sack from its back onto the counter. Catching a glimpse through the opening of the sack, I saw what looked like animal fur. I couldn't see it clearly, but it was probably a large wild boar. That, most likely, was the payment for the dagger.

"Gogg-gogg-bubugu."

"Thank you very much! ♡"

Having successfully completed its 'shopping' without incident, the Orc rang the doorbell and left the shop as if nothing had happened.

Once the 'customer' had left, Naga spun on her heel and opened the cupboard door where I was hiding.

"And that is how it is."

At her words, I said in shock:

".....No way..... is this....."

"A weapons and armor shop for monsters!?"

Haven't you ever wondered? Where those giant axes that Minotaurs sometimes carry come from? Who makes the equipment for Goblins, Orcs, and Kobolds? Of course—the

answer is that they scavenge from dead humans or make it themselves. But if you think about it, in a world of creatures with even a little bit of wisdom, if there is a demand, someone will think of a supply. It wouldn't have been strange if I'd noticed it sooner.

"Hmph. Exactly," Naga said, brushing her hair back pointlessly. "Its very existence is an absolute secret to humans! The monster equipment specialty shop: **Skull Crusher**!"

".....That's a pretty grim name! I mean, I guess in this case, the fancy building is the thing that's actually out of place..... but wait a second. You say it's a secret from humans, but no matter how you look at it, the person who built this shop and procured the merchandise is—"

"Hmph! How naive, Lina Inverse!" Naga pointed a finger sharply at me. "To think that 'man-made' equals 'made by human hands' is nothing but pure arrogance!"

".....Which means....."

"Exactly!" Naga flipped a cloak she wasn't even wearing, a habit of hers. "The owner of this shop is none other than a **Dwarf**!"

"No way!" I blurted out.

Everyone knows about the race called Dwarves, but almost no one has ever actually met one. Even I had never met one until now; my knowledge was limited to books at the Sorcerers' Guild and hearsay.

They are described as stout, sturdy, bearded little men with intelligence equal to humans. They aren't exactly a rare species, but the main reason people rarely encounter them is that Dwarves live almost exclusively underground. They dig holes in the earth, are born there, live there, and die there. Despite having longer lifespans than humans, many never breathe the surface air in their entire lives. To them, "pioneering new land" is synonymous with "subterranean expansion," and there's even a theory that many of the "underground ruins" we humans find are actually the remains of their former dwellings.

And one must not forget that most of them are first-class blacksmiths and craftsmen. In human society, equipment or crafts made by Dwarves fetch high prices just by virtue of their origin, and they truly possess a quality that matches the price.

"I see."

In any case, if word of a shop like this spread among humans, things would get a bit... loud and dangerous. On the other hand, if they made a habit of killing every human who saw the shop, it would eventually lead to war with humanity.

".....And yet, here you are, blabbing away despite me telling you it’s a secret. What a chatterbox this little girl is."

That exasperated voice suddenly came from right behind me.

"———Eek!!"

I spun around in a panic—and saw the floorboards of the cupboard I had just been hiding in pop loose.

"Yo..... hup....."

Crawling out from the hole was a bearded little man.

"Manager!" Naga called out.

The man stood beside me and looked up as if appraising me. He was half a head shorter than even me, and I’m hardly what you’d call tall.

Stubby red hair. A stubby red beard. Faded but well-maintained fur clothes. He looked exactly like the illustrations of Dwarves I had seen in books at the Sorcerers' Guild. If you took a certain kingdom's heir I’d met before and shrunk him down, he’d probably look just like this.

"It is true that this shop is a secret from humans, but well, what’s known is known. There’s no helping it now. Therefore, to keep your mouth shut, I’m going to have you help out at the shop for a while. I’ll pay you a proper reward, so don't go talking to others after you return to human society."

"What?" I asked back instinctively.

"Your name?"

"Lina. Lina Inverse. I just came into the mountains for some mushroom hunting and stumbled upon this place, so I thought I’d take a look inside."

"I see. I am Gant. The owner of this shop. And you, over there—" He stroked his beard as he looked toward Naga. "From your human perspective, I suppose it seems outrageous to sell weapons to Goblins and Minotaurs."

"Well, yeah." I gave a wry smile. It was, to put it bluntly, a way of turning me into an accomplice. "I get that much, but I have one question. Why does this shop have such a fancy appearance?"

Manager Gant smirked proudly at my question. "It’s a business strategy to attract the female customer demographic."

"Female customers!?"

.....Hmm..... I’ve heard that in the restaurant industry, designing a place with female customers in mind can boost sales, but..... I don't really want to see a female Minotaur customer.....

"Anyway, I haven't heard your answer about the part-time job yet?"

When Gant-san asked, I flashed a smile. "I assume there's a paycheck involved?"

In response, he thrust out his closed right hand. "About this much for a day."

When he opened his palm, a small gold nugget was sitting there.

"Welcome! ♡"

Naga's voice and mine harmonized for a group of Goblins who had just rung the doorbell.

In the end, I simply accepted the job. The pay wasn't bad at all, and doing business with Goblins isn't exactly an experience you get every day. Well, I suppose it was also partly for the fun of it.....

Anyway, I donned the uniform apron dress and started my shift alongside Naga.

As the sun went down, the shop began to get busy. According to Manager Gant, many of the Goblins, Orcs, and Kobolds tend to come at night. Looking at the merchandise up close, I could see that the aged appearance of the items was actually designed that way from the start.

As I was helping Naga deal with the customers…..

"Gyuge?" One of the customers knit their brows in suspicion at the same time as the earth—and the building—began to shake!

.....Go..... Gogogogogo.....

An earthquake!?

But before I could shout it out—

DOGOPAAH!

The shop floor exploded and shattered! I was lucky enough to be behind the counter, so I didn't take any damage, but I heard screams and the sound of destruction! Looking over, I saw a massive hole gapped in the floor. From deep within it, something slowly began to rise.

First, a horn. Then an iron helmet with a faceplate modeled after a demon. Next came a shoulder guard. Then full plate armor. A dwarf wrapped in a black suit of armor and a cloak rose up, his arms crossed majestically.

But that wasn't the end. Next to appear were the Goblins who should have fallen into the hole. And then, the creature they were all riding on—a giant mole wearing armor—emerged from the floor!

From the height of the mole's snout, the Black Knight looked down at Manager Gant.

"My apologies. I slightly mismanaged the reins of my beloved steed, the Great Earth-Mole, Gen'engonbu."

"Liar! You did it on purpose! Such blatant harassment!" Manager Gant shouted, his face turning crimson with rage.

".....An acquaintance?" Naga whispered from the corner of the shop.

Gant-san heard her and pointed straight at the Black Knight. "He is the manager of my rival shop, **Pandemonium**—the Dark Knight, Abyss Flame!"

".....That’s not a manager's name. That’s just a title." My weak comment was drowned out by the boos the Goblins were throwing at the Dark Knight.

"However, look at it this way, Gant!" The Dark Knight's voice boomed, overpowering even the Goblins' heckling. "You should just quit running a weapons shop that pampers women and children!"

More booing from the Goblins.

"Weapons are for fighting! Those without the spirit of hegemony have no right to hold a weapon!"

"There are weapons for protecting, too!" Manager Gant barked back. But the Dark Knight just scoffed.

"Ridiculous! No matter how much you sugarcoat it, weapons are ultimately power! Unlike you and your weak-minded shop, my **Pandemonium** is a shop opened for those who aspire to hegemony! Those who raise our weapons will eventually drive out the humans and rule the world! That is our ambition!"

"Listen to you, acting all high and mighty."

Everyone's eyes gathered on the source of the voice. On me.

"......Hmph. A human?" The Dark Knight said, as if only just noticing me.

"Shut up! Don't go spouting your high-and-mighty nonsense after you just smashed my workplace with a mole!" I snapped.

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The hearty laughter came from Manager Gant. "Just as this girl says! You've been put in your place, Abyss Flame!" He stepped in between me and the Dark Knight and gave me a quick glance. "But because that's the case, this is a matter between me and Abyss Flame! Leave this to me!"

Since he put it that way, I couldn't really press the issue further. I nodded and stayed quiet, and the Manager glared at the Dark Knight.

"Then it's a contest, Abyss Flame! A sales competition for the next ten days! If I win, you're taking off that helmet!"

"Fine! But if I am victorious, I shall paint both the interior and exterior of this shop in the color of darkness!"

"If it comes to that, I'll paint it black myself before I let you touch it!"

Their gazes sparked with friction!

"Hmph! I'll make you regret this, Gant! Look forward to the next ten days! Let's go, Gen'engonbu! Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.....!"

Along with Abyss Flame's loud laughter, the giant mole slowly sank back into the ground.

Left behind were me, Naga, the Manager, and the Goblin customers. In the deafening silence—

"Alright!" The Manager clapped his hands together. "That's how it is, customers! Starting tomorrow..... no, I won't be stingy, starting today and for a while, everything is twenty percent off! Tell your friends!"

At the Manager's discount declaration, the Goblins cheered. Completely forgetting about the hole in the floor, they went back to their shopping spree.

By the time the next morning came, the giant hole in the floor had vanished without a trace.

I closed up shop around midnight and grabbed some sleep in the staff dormitory located in the basement. When I woke up a bit late the morning after and poked my head into the shop, the hole in the floor had already vanished.

Hmm... Dwarf construction skills are truly terrifying...

When I mentioned it to the Manager, he simply replied with a nonchalant, "I fixed it."

After having a late breakfast-slash-lunch, I opened the shop shortly before noon. The customer turnout was overwhelmingly higher than yesterday. Whether it was word-of-mouth among the Goblins or something else, customers—not just Goblins, but Kobolds and Orcs too—came in an almost non-nothing stream. At peak times, even with Naga and me working together, we could barely keep up.

Since I didn't know the languages of the Orcs or Kobolds, I specialized in handling the Goblins. Naga handled the rest.

『*So, you're buying the steel scale mail. That will be two deer, please!* ♡』

『*Ho-ho-ho-ho!*』

『*Is this a gift or for personal use? What color ribbon would you like for the wrapping?*』

『*Ho-ho-ho-ho!*』

Whenever we sold something, we tossed the "payment"—animals, plants, and so on—into the shelves behind the counter.

Four cupboards stood lined up there, and the floor inside them could be opened. One was the Manager's private passage. One led to the staff's underground dorm. One was the warehouse for stock, and the last was the storehouse for payments... or rather, the goods received.

When we were busy, I sometimes accidentally tossed things into the wrong shelf. Yesterday, when I went down to the dorm, a boar carcass was lying there, which was quite an unpleasant surprise.

Manager Gant was constantly shuttling between the warehouse and the shop, busy restocking merchandise and organizing the "payments." Time flew by in a blur of activity. As evening turned to night, the number of customers increased even further—until finally.

"Bugugoh?" One of the customers, an Orc, knit his brows in suspicion at the same moment—

...Go... Gogogogogo...

The earth and the building began to shake!

No way... not this again... A premonition raced down my spine.

DOGOPAAH!

Exactly as expected. The shop floor exploded. It was a perfect recreation of last night: overlapping screams and the sound of destruction. The only difference was that what emerged from the hole wasn't the Dark Knight and a mole, but a giant earthworm thick enough to swallow a person whole!

"This is an act of harassment from my rival!" Manager Gant shouted. He raised his voice to address the customers. "Customers! I shall lend you whatever weapons are at hand! Please assist in repelling this!"

The diverse war cries of the customers melded into one—but before they could move.

『*Icicle Lance!*』

『*Damu Brass!*』

Naga's cold spell froze the giant worm in an instant, and the strike I unleashed shattered it into pieces! *Kishikaki-paki-eeeeen!*

Because our handling of the situation was so efficient, the customers and the Manager stood frozen, completely let down by the lack of a fight.

『*Ho-ho-ho-ho! There is no need to trouble our guests with opponents of this level!*』

"Exactly!"

...I usually prefer to avoid trouble if possible, but if the Dark Knight wanted a fight, then fine—I'd gladly give him one. Naga and I exchanged looks and gave a firm nod simultaneously.

"Manager! We're going over there to lodge a formal complaint!"

By the time I said it, I had already spun around and dived into the hole the worm had made, with Naga right behind me!

"......W-Wait—"

Manager Gant's voice echoed from above, but—

『*Levitation!*』

『*Lighting!*』

By then, Naga and I had already linked arms, cast our respective spells, and were heading deep into the earth.

If the giant worm was the Dark Knight's doing, then as long as we followed the tunnel, we would naturally reach the enemy's hideout—or so I thought.

"......This is... something I didn't see coming..."

I looked at Naga. We had passed through the long tunnel and emerged into a cavern. The hemispherical cavern had several other holes—besides the one we had just come from—opening up, down, left, and right. At a glance, there were about ten of them. If we moved forward recklessly, we would definitely get lost.

"Let’s head back and ask Manager Gant where the rival shop is—"

『*Ho-ho-ho-ho! What is this timid talk!? That is not like Lina Inverse at all!*』

My proposal was met with Naga’s echoing laughter.

『*First of all, knowing that Manager! Instead of telling us the location, the most he’d say is, "This is my problem, you two stay and mind the shop!"*』

"He definitely would say that..."

『*And if the Manager stops us, what happens to our dream of making a fortune by selling the Dwarf-made goods we "confiscate" from the enemy as a settlement fee!?*』

"When did we ever talk about that!? Besides, no matter how much they're Dwarf-made, no one’s going to buy battered equipment intended for Goblins and Kobolds... actually, they wouldn't even believe they *were* Dwarf-made!"

I ranted at her all at once, silencing Naga, before continuing.

"——That said, I do want to make the guy pay for what he did. The problem is how to track him down..."

While the magical light illuminated the area, I took a look around. Above us were two holes in addition to the larger one we had arrived through. In every direction, there were tunnels of various sizes leading into the darkness.

"This way."

I spoke and entered the tunnel opening to the side without waiting for Naga’s reply. Naga hurried after me.

"Wait, Lina, how can you tell?"

"Because the hole is large," I said as I ducked to move forward. Even though it was a relatively large tunnel, I was in danger of hitting my head if I stood up straight. "An earthworm's size might fit through the other holes, but for that giant mole from yesterday, it’s a different story. It needs a tunnel at least this big."

『*Hmph. I see.*』

"Besides, even if there’s no proof the Dark Knight sent the worm today, yesterday’s mole was definitely his fault. If we just follow this tunnel—"

I cut myself off and went silent. A presence existed in the darkness far ahead in the long horizontal tunnel. With a low rumbling sound, something was coming our way!

A giant mole? Or another giant worm? Either way, I’d freeze it and smash it!

I chanted a spell under my breath.

"Icicle Lance!"

The strike I unleashed definitely hit something in the darkness ahead! *OSHI!* I felt the impact! But—

...Do... Dododododo!

The rumbling faltered for an instant, but then immediately started approaching again!

Impossible! It didn't work!?

"Naga! Send the light forward!"

『*Hmph! Understood!*』

Naga cast the magical light she was controlling past my shoulder toward the front! Illuminated by that light—

I saw countless normal-sized earthworms stampeding toward us!

"Why Meeeeeeeeeeee!?"

An earthworm avalanche swallowed up our screams!

(Threat of the Underground Kingdom: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

Writing the end of this chapter reminded me of something. When the author was a child, I was playing ball in a field near my house and the ball fell into a ditch. I reached out to grab the ball sitting on the sludge, only to realize it wasn't sludge, but a massive, dense cluster of pill bugs.

AH! Uwaaaaaaaaaaa!

Ugh, I had finally forgotten about that! Next episode preview!? Who cares about that! (Lashing out in annoyance).

Next time: "Threat of the Underground Kingdom" (Conclusion).

I deeply apologize for the unsightly behavior in this preview, but please wait for the next part!

Threat of the Underground Kingdom [Part 2]

Summary:

In the mountains far from any village, Lina accidentally discovered a fancy-looking shop where Naga was working! Apparently, it was a specialty shop for monster equipment run by a Dwarf named Gant. Through various circumstances, Lina started a part-time job there alongside Naga. However, that night, the manager of a rival shop, the Dark Knight Abyss Flame, appeared by breaking through the floor on a giant mole! The two shops ended up in a sales competition. The next day, a giant earthworm—presumably sent by the Dark Knight—broke through the floor again! Burning with rage, Lina and Naga decided to trace the worm's tunnel back to the rival shop! However, on the way, a certain trouble attacked them!

I saw a faint light. Next, I smelled damp earth. I blinked several times and finally realized I was lying on my back.

"Oh. You're awake."

At the sound of the man's voice, I turned my eyes and saw a stranger—a black-haired Dwarf wearing overalls and goggles.

The room wasn't exactly spacious. Small light-stones embedded in the ceiling dimly illuminated the space.

"......Wait.....?" I muttered, sitting up. My head wasn't quite clear yet. *Just... why did things turn out like this...?*

"Man, I never thought someone... much less a human, would be in a place like that."

The Dwarf walked toward me as he spoke. I had been laid on a bed; it was likely for a Dwarf, as it was a size smaller than usual."......Me..... what.....?"

I replied to the Dwarf’s joke in my usual, perfectly normal tone. Yet, for some reason, I couldn't stop my entire body from trembling. Gradually, my head began to clear.

I remembered descending into the basement with Naga through the hole in the shop floor. And after that...

The Dwarf looked at me with pitying eyes. "......Ah..... I see the shock has muddled your memory....."

Shock? After that...?

"Don't you remember?"

The small murmur barely reached my ears. Honestly, what is this Master Dwarf talking about? It made it sound as if I had partially lost my memory for some reason. Good grief.

The Dwarf stroked his long black beard, looking dead serious. "You were caught in an earthworm avalanche, lass."

Naga and I had entered the tunnel—and, uh... right! A cave-in! I remembered! We were caught in a cave-in and lost consciousness!

"An earthworm...?"

I instinctively questioned his nonsensical statement.

"Yeah. We were doing an earthworm drive-hunt to gather food for the Great Moles. You happened to get caught up in it. I wiped down your clothes for the most part, though. Do you remember?"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. What kind of meaningless joke is that? Getting caught in an earthworm avalanche? Such a nonsense thing couldn't possibly happen in reality."

That’s right, cave-in! Just a cave-in! A cave-in explains everything without any forced logic!

Recovering my composure, I flashed a smile as I stepped off the bed.

".....I see. You rescued me when I was caught in the cave-in. Thank you very much."

As I thanked him, the Dwarf gave me a look that felt strangely like he was worrying about a sick person. "......Ah. Yeah. Right. A cave-in. It was a cave-in."

See? I knew it! ♡

Now that the truth was safely cleared up...

"Um, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Lina. Lina Inverse."

"I'm Bududu."

After we introduced ourselves, I suddenly remembered something trivial.

"By the way, Bududu-san, when you found me, wasn't there someone else with me?"

"No. I only found you..... Wait, was there someone else!?"

"No. It's fine, it's fine. Never mind."

"Fine? That's not fine, is it!? Well, I'm sure they wouldn't die from an earth—*cough, wheeze*—a cave-in of that level."

"I think so too."

Especially since the "someone else" was Naga.

"I'll probably just bump into her again somewhere. So, about the reward for rescuing me....."

"Ah. Don't need it, don't need it."

Cutting off my words, the Dwarf waved his hands dismissively. "I hear you humans use coins made of gold or silver for trades and thanks..... but honestly, I wouldn't be very grateful for those. To us, gold and silver aren't exactly worthless, but they're things that just come out whenever you dig in the right spot. A craftsman might use them for materials, but for a Great Mole rancher like me, they don't mean much."

"I see... then I'll take you up on your kindness."

I lowered my head in a bow. "By the way—you mentioned being a Great Mole rancher. Do you raise them on something like a ranch? I'd love to see it."

I couldn't suppress my curiosity.

"I could take you for a tour—Ah. But we have the earthworm pits for their feed and such....."

"I'll pass on the tour."

I found myself giving an immediate answer for some reason.

"Uhm. Now that I think about it, I have something I need to do. Do you know a weapon and armor shop around here called Pandemonium? It's run by someone named Abyss Flame."

"Oh, I know it, I know it." Bududu-san nodded. "They're doing quite well lately, aren't they? I heard rumors they recently opened a new shop. What do they call it, a 'chain store expansion'? Man, they're really thriving. I wish we could share in that success."

He let out a hearty "Gah-ha-ha!" laugh.

I see. So it wasn't known that they were harassing other shops behind the scenes. Regardless, there was no point in complaining about it here.

I put on a pleasant smile. "Then, could you tell me how to get to... would it be the main shop where Abyss Flame-san is? I have some business there."

Of course, I couldn't exactly say, *'I'm going to go pay them back for trashing my workplace.'*

"The main shop..... the main shop..... Oh, over there. It's a short ride away on a Great Mole..... I'll give you a lift on mine. It's a bit of a trek on foot."

He gave a broad, boisterous laugh.

When I stepped out of the house, I couldn't help but let out a sigh. The scene of the Dwarf world stretching out before me was simply breathtaking.

The entire underground world was crafted by the hands of Dwarves. A path ran along the rim of a mortar-shaped basin, with the entrances to houses lined up facing the path.

Luminous moss grew—no, was planted—along all the walls of the path. Thus, this entire underground cavern emitted a faint glow. Furthermore, light-stones were embedded at every corner of the street, serving the role of streetlights. Great Moles carrying Dwarves were scurrying around the various paths, and from far and near came the echoes of hammers striking—perhaps some construction or smithing work.

The houses themselves were actually quite incredible, each one carefully hollowed out from a single giant rock, but the scenery outside was even more impressive.

It was a vast space, like two shallow mortars joined top and bottom. It was large enough that a small town could fit inside it entirely. The whole area cast a faint light. The many pillars connecting and supporting the ceiling and floor of the cavern were clearly man-made.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Bududu-san emerged from his house, having disappeared around a corner for a moment. He had likely gone to a mole ranch or somewhere to fetch his steed.

As I waited quietly for a moment—

...Do-do... do-do-do-DODODODO!

The heavy vibration grew louder and louder—

DODODODODODODO-ZAZASHAAA!

The source of the roar burst out from a nearby corner as a massive black shape trailing a cloud of dust. It made a right-angled turn and came to a screeching halt right in front of me.

It was a hairy giant. It had thick, stubby front and back legs. Its height up to its back was roughly the same as mine. Its total length was probably about double that. Its massive body looked a little different from a normal-sized mole, but from any angle, it was undeniably a mole.

Bududu-san, sitting astride a tandem saddle equipped on the mole's back, grinned at me.

"This is my beloved steed, Barudaizu. Now, hop on."

I took his outstretched hand and waited for him to help me onto the saddle.

"Go, Barudaizu!"

Along with the command, the reins snapped, and the mole took off!

The earth shook and the wind roared. I hurriedly clenched my teeth and clung to Bududu-san from behind. The speed was incredible, but the shaking was even more so—it was like a carriage racing at full speed across a wasteland.

"It's a bit bumpy, but bear with it! And don't talk carelessly or you'll bite your tongue!"

Bududu-san shouted calmly amidst the violent shaking. I could barely manage a groan in response.

The Great Mole ran along the circumference of the basin for a while, eventually descending to a path two levels closer to the bottom at a crossroad, and then began running along the circumference again.

I really wished he'd slow down at least a little bit when turning.

After running for a while, we entered a side tunnel leading away from the great cavern. We traveled for some time through a path where luminous moss was only planted here and there on the walls—and before long:

"We're here."

The Great Mole came to a stop, digging its claws into the ground. Bududu-san's voice reached me as I nearly pitched forward.

It was an ordinary cave. It was large, but that was all. Except for the hole we had just come through, there were no traces of human or dwarf intervention on the rock faces.

"From here on is the grounds of the Pandemonium main shop. If you go straight this way, you'll find the entrance."

He pointed toward one side of the cave. Looking that way, I could indeed see a light different from that of the luminous moss.

I climbed down from the mole and gave Bududu-san a bow. "Truly, thank you for everything."

"Mm. Take care—Let's go, Barudaizu!"

He flashed a smile, maneuvered the reins to turn the Great Mole around, and departed back the way we had come.

Watching his retreating figure, I took a deep breath.

—*Alright.* Finally, the real show was about to begin.

I spun on my heel and began to walk. Toward Pandemonium, ruled by the Dark Knight Abyss Flame.

The door opened with a heavy sound. The gazes of those inside the shop all converged on me at once.

The air froze in an instant.

The shop was probably nearly three times the size of Manager Gant's Skull Crusher. The interior was decorated in eerie dark blue tones. Although there was lighting from light-stones, bonfires were burning here and there, presumably to add to the atmosphere.

The customers were Orcs, Ogres, Minotaurs, Goblins, Kobolds, Trolls, and for some reason, even an Elf woman. It was doing quite a brisk business. All of them were staring at me.

—*Why is a human here?*

I didn't flinch. "Where is the manager, Abyss Flame!?"

At my question, one of the Elf women, dressed in a red leather outfit that was practically a one-piece swimsuit, darted her eyes toward something.

I didn't miss it. I looked toward the shelves lined up behind the counter.

I dashed straight through the shop.

"Ah..... ah.....!"

A woman's voice called out from behind me, but I ignored her! I vaulted over the counter and opened a shelf—I'd learned the layout from the Manager's shop. I flipped up the floorboard—and without hesitation, I leaped into the opening!

I landed in a straight corridor with two doors facing it. Listening closely, I could hear voices coming from the room nearest to me.

I placed my hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly. Luckily, it was well-maintained and turned without a sound. Opening the door slightly, I saw two figures inside.

One was an Elf woman wearing a revealing leather outfit, much like the one upstairs. And the other...

It was the Dark Knight Abyss Flame, encased in full armor, not even showing his face, exactly as I had seen him before!

The two were sitting across from each other at a table. What on earth were they talking about?

Holding my breath, the conversation between the Elf woman and Abyss Flame reached my ears.

".....I want to keep working too. If I'm just shut up at home, my world gets so small. But he says he'll support me on his own income and tells me to quit my part-time job..... I really think he just wants to keep me locked up at home....."

"......Hmm..... However, you'll have to check with him to see what his true intentions are."

Abyss Flame inserted a straw into the drink on the table through a gap in his faceplate, took a sip, and continued. "It's certainly possible he wants you to be a full-time housewife. Or perhaps by you working, he feels as though it's an implicit comment that his own earnings are insufficient."

"That's....."

"Or perhaps he simply dislikes that uniform of ours and doesn't want you dressed like that. But in any case, there's no doubt that he cares for you. What's needed first is for the two of you to talk it out and confirm each other's feelings. You can decide whether to quit the shop or not after that, right?"

"......Yes..... Thank you very much, Manager."

He's taking consultations from his employees!

The Dark Knight is giving life advice!! And he's being incredibly kind about it too!

What am I supposed to do now? If, for example, a typical villainous scene were unfolding—like him saying, *'Heh-heh-heh, I'll make you my woman!'* and her crying, *'Nooo! Stop!'*—I could have burst in heroically shouting, *'That's far enough!'*...

But if I were to burst in now shouting *'That's far enough!'* in this situation, I'd be the one failing as a human being.

While I was frozen at the doorway, wondering what to do—either by chance or because he sensed my presence, Abyss Flame suddenly turned toward me.

Our eyes met. Both of them froze in place.

"? What's wrong, Manager? Ah!"

It was awkward.

The Elf woman noticed me and let out a voice full of reproach. It was incredibly awkward. Left with no choice, I pushed the door open, forcing a polite smile onto my face.

"E-Excuse me... I have some business with Abyss Flame... the Manager..."

"Were you listening!?!? To what we were just talking about!?"

The Elf woman’s face flushed bright red with a mix of anger and embarrassment, and her eyes even shimmered with a thin veil of tears. I hurriedly waved my hands in a panic.

"No, no, no! I wasn't listening at all! I just got here! Literally just now!"

She seemed to see right through that clever lie of mine, however.

".....You are the absolute *worst*..."

She spat the words out under her breath and dashed past me, running off toward the main shop floor. That left just me, Abyss Flame, and a very heavy silence.

I felt... a massive amount of guilt.

In an attempt to change the atmosphere, Abyss Flame gave a sharp cough. "Ahem... as I recall, you're the employee from Gant's place... right?"

".....Ah..... yes....."

"Well, about what just happened... you didn't know the circumstances, so don't worry about it."

".....I'm sorry....."

...Somehow, I was being comforted. Me.

"So, today you've come to—"

Abyss Flame’s words were cut off right there.

ZUDON-GOOOOO!

A magnificent explosion echoed from the direction of the shop floor!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Come out, Dark Knight Abyss Flame! This Naga the White Serpent has come in person to settle the score!"

As Abyss Flame and I rushed back to the shop, the scene unfolding was almost exactly as I had predicted.

The entrance of the shop had been blown away, likely by an attack spell, and thick clouds of dust were swirling in the air. Standing atop a display table near the center of the shop was Naga, dressed in her apron dress and striking a defiant pose! See? I knew she’d turn up.

"Naga!"

I ran toward her and called out. She looked down at me and said, "Oh, Lina, you came too? I'm surprised you survived that flash flood."

She was saying nonsensical things again.

"Flash flood? It was a cave-in, wasn't it?"

When I asked with a furrowed brow, Naga looked back at me suspiciously. "What are you talking about, Lina? That was—"

Naga's eyes flickered for a moment with a shadow of fear before she cut herself off.

Ah... I see. At that moment, I realized the truth.

Naga, out of shock and terror from the cave-in, had likely sealed that memory away in the depths of her consciousness and replaced it with a fake memory of a flash flood. Usually, I'd be in the mood to relentlessly grill her and poke holes in her story, but for some reason, this time I didn't feel like it. I must have grown up and become a much more generous human being. I’ve matured.

"Oh, whatever. I'm taking care of this guy!"

Abyss Flame shouted as he raised his voice, ignoring my internal thoughts.

"Is this the true form of that shop that pampers women and children!? Then we shall take up the challenge! All you who have gathered at Pandemonium! Take up your weapons now! And crush our enemies!"

A chorus of war cries echoed out. *OOOOOH!*

The customers—Goblins, Orcs, Kobolds, Ogres, Trolls, and Minotaurs—each grabbed whatever weapon was nearest: daggers, swords, spears, and axes. They took up fighting stances against us! I see. So he intended to unilaterally frame us as the villains and dispose of us, huh? Even if he was a "good" manager, a rogue is still a rogue.

I scanned the room. The 'customers' were all sending glares of hostility our way. The Elf employees were hurriedly running to the corner of the shop to escape. And then...

"I'll teach you!"

"Freeze Arrow!"

I fired ten or so shafts of ice!

Kishikaki-eeeeeeeen!

The Minotaur and several Kobolds and Orcs standing near him were frozen solid. By the way, I used the Minotaur as a shield, so I didn't take any damage! While the others were unable to move, I leaped out to the side.

"Go!"

At Abyss Flame’s command, the customers came charging at us with a roar!

"Freeze Arrow!"

But—alas, they had no teamwork whatsoever! I used the same spell to freeze the group that was trying to charge toward Naga. I chanted another spell under my breath as I dove straight into the middle of the enemy crowd!

"Impossible!! Attack spells!?!?"

Abyss Flame cried out in shock. But it was too late to be surprised!

Some of the customers were still trying to attack, but they were swinging their weapons so wildly they were hitting each other, or simply slipping on the ice and taking themselves out. They were no longer even a challenge. The Troll, who I thought might be a bit of a pain, didn't have as much spirit as he looked. Seeing the Minotaur—a fellow heavyweight—taken down so quickly, he retreated to the corner of the shop with his giant club and held his breath, watching us.

Naga fired off one more cold-based spell, and with that, the customers' resistance ceased completely.

"......Wh-......! What is the meaning of this!?"

I looked over and saw Abyss Flame, his voice trembling with rage. Naga and I glared back at him.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! 'What is the meaning of this?' You're making me laugh, Dark Knight Abyss Flame!"

"In the first place, you're the one who started the harassment, aren't you!?"

"———Wh-Oaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

At the scream coming from the entrance, Naga and I turned around. The voice sounded familiar.

There stood Manager Gant, staring into the shop through the hole we'd blasted open. He had a stunned expression, looking back and forth between us and Abyss Flame, seemingly unable to grasp the situation. He might have come here because he was worried about us, but—

"It's okay. We'll be finished talking soon."

I gave him a wink. Manager Gant stared at me blankly.

"GAAAAAAAANT!"

Abyss Flame's roar echoed. I couldn't see his expression because of the faceplate, but the aura of anger was palpable. When I stepped in between them, Abyss Flame stopped his advance, though he still radiated fury as he shouted at Manager Gant.

"Gant! Don't tell me you didn't explain to these temporary hires! That the 'harassment' was part of the sales promotion campaign event!"

".....I'm..... I'm sorry, Owner....."

Manager Gant’s voice was as quiet as a mosquito’s buzz.

".....Event.....?"

"......Owner......?"

Naga and I muttered, frozen in place.

"Well, as you can see, this Pandemonium is a weapon and armor shop with this kind of atmosphere. We unified the image with a 'Chaos Legion that loves war' concept. The uniforms for the employees and myself were designed with that in mind. And the first branch of that brand is the 'Skull Crusher' where you two work."

"Uh well... so that armor is supposed to be a uniform?"

I couldn't help but interject. Where in the world would someone have a real name like that?

"I understand the circumstances, but I feel like the name 'Skull Crusher' isn't very appealing to women..."

"What are you saying?" Abyss Flame replied in a tone that even sounded a bit amused. "Doesn't it sound like a name full of the bittersweetness of youth? It's exactly the kind of name that would appeal to women."

.....Bittersweet? Skull Crusher? That's just bitter.

I guess his sense of aesthetics is quite different from a human's... ignoring my feeling of being unconvinced, he continued.

"I thought of an event that would serve as an advertisement for the new chain. The setting is that 'the two shops are rivals.' We 'harass' each other and challenge each other to a sales competition. In reality, it’s a trial event to let customers who happen to be there actually try out the weapons."

"......In other words, it's all... a staged performance to attract customers!!"

At my shout, Manager Gant gave a small nod. "It's more of an event show than a staged performance. The customers around here actually know about it, you see."

"But, saying you'd take off your helmet or paint the shop black if you lost..."

At Naga's murmur, Abyss Flame said calmly, "I can just wear a mask underneath when I take the helmet off. As for the shop, we can just paint it back to the original color after a few days. That's all there is to it. And then the winning side complains about it, and the script continues with the rivalry ongoing."

"But... if that's the case, you should have explained it from the start...!"

At my grumbling, Manager Gant looked toward Abyss Flame with an apologetic gaze.

".....If I had told them in advance..... Employees who aren't good at acting might ruin the atmosphere with a transparent performance... That's why I didn't tell them, but... I never thought they were both attack magic users who would instant-kill the giant worm and then storm this place....."

"Well, to be fair, nobody would usually expect that," Abyss Flame said in a bitter tone.

"So what? It was all just a misunderstanding?"

"Well, that's how it turns out," Abyss Flame nodded at Naga's words. "The root cause was our lack of communication. And besides—" He looked at Naga. "I was the one who jumped to the conclusion that you were a 'villain role' for the event and ordered the customers to attack. As an apology, I'll make sure your part-time pay is extra generous."

Naga and I exchanged glances.

".....If that's the case....."

"Well... I guess we have no complaints."

In the end, for about ten days after that incident, Naga and I continued our part-time job at Skull Crusher. The giant worm attacked two more times, but now that we knew the situation, Naga and I put on a spirited performance to liven up the scene. Manager Gant gave us high praise, saying it was as if we were truly terrified of the worms.

—Well, of course, there is absolutely no reason why Naga or I would be afraid of something like a worm. Let's quit talking about those creatures.

The world is not just the surface that we see. Deep beneath the ground we walk on every day, someone is living and breathing. If you use your imagination, there could be other worlds we don't know about stretching across the sky or within the sea. This incident taught me that.

If I ever find an out-of-place shop in the middle of the mountains again, I think I'll try stepping through its front door once more.

(Threat of the Underground Kingdom: End)

The Wife Who Is Right There

A sharp *crack!*—the dry sound of a slap—rang out through the salty sea breeze.

I instinctively turned my eyes toward the source.

Sailors, passersby—the port at midday had a decent crowd of people. But in one particular corner of the harbor, a man and a woman stood facing each other. Their ages were far enough apart to be father and daughter, and yet, I recognized both of them.

Upon closer inspection, the men standing near them, who looked like mere onlookers at first glance, were also familiar faces.

“Pull yourself together, Captain! This isn't like you!”

In response to the tan, red-haired woman’s shout, the man—who was around fifty—remained silent. He simply picked up the captain’s hat that had fallen when he was struck. As he turned his gaze away from the woman in front of him, his eyes just happened to meet mine.

A light of hope ignited in the man’s exhausted expression.

Several of the men around him also let out small cries of, “Oh!”

“Ah—you’re—”

Drawn by the reaction, the redhead also looked my way. “Lina! If it isn't Lina!”

“If it’s you...!” “Old man! Maybe, just maybe...” “Yes! Just perhaps!”

Holding a somewhat troublesome premonition in my chest, I spoke up. “Long time no see. ...So, what happened?”

That was how I ended up asking the question.

I wondered how long ago it had been. In a different port town from this one, I had taken a job helping to salvage treasure from a sunken ship. My client at the time had been this fifty-year-old man, Captain Virgo.

By the way, the redhead Tania and the men around her were all his crew members.

In the end, due to various circumstances, the treasure salvage had been cut short the moment we found a few gold coins and such. But come to think of it, Captain Virgo and his crew weren't originally professional treasure hunters; they were supposed to be merchants. It wasn't that strange to run into them at a different port like this.

“I was in your debt back then.”

In a cheap tavern along the harbor where the sea breeze felt as if it had soaked into the very core of the pillars, the group and I sat around a table. Though, with a table that small, the entire crew couldn't possibly sit down, so the setup consisted of the Captain and me facing each other, with the crew standing behind him.

“If you hadn't been there, we wouldn't have made it out safely.”

Captain Virgo said this as he downed a mug of ale in one go. “I want to borrow your strength again.”

“No. It’s fine. I’ll skip the small talk.” The Captain addressed Tania, then looked at me intently.

“...Wait, don't tell me you’re going to ask me to help you look for treasure again,” I asked, drawing back slightly as I took a tiny sip of my tomato juice. To be blunt, I’d had quite enough of that.

However, the Captain weakly shook his head from side to side. “No. This time it’s... well, I want you to protect me. That’s what this is about.”

“Someone’s targeting you?” The Captain remained silent for a moment, then placed his left prosthetic hand—*clunk*—onto the table. “Do you know the story behind this arm?”

“Sorry, old man. I told her a little bit,” Tania said from behind the Captain. Yes. I had heard it from her before, so I knew. The person who had taken the Captain’s left arm was his ex-wife.

“Right now, the one targeting me is my former wife—”

“Well, I think I’ll head out now.” I finished my tomato juice in one gulp and tried to stand up, but the crew members surrounded me at the Captain’s command.

“Wait just a minute!” “Why are you so determined to leave!?”

I reluctantly sat back down. “Well, I don't have any hard evidence... but I just get the feeling this is the kind of case I shouldn't get involved in. And, how do I put it—”

“Don't decide that without any proof!” the Captain pleaded. “At any rate, as you know, we found a few gold coins during the salvage, but ultimately it was canceled. It was questionable whether we’d even see a profit. However, rumors in the world claim that we secretly hauled up a massive fortune without telling anyone.”

“Well, rumors always grow tails and fins.”

“It seems that story—with its very large fins—reached the ears of my ex-wife... She sent a threatening letter demanding a cut.”

“To begin with, it’s impossible to pay her when she’s demanding money for treasure we never even found,” Tania added, backing up the Captain. The other sailors chimed in one after another. “Exactly. But that lady isn't the type to listen to reason.”

“—Wait, hold on a second. I heard that the wife was the one in the wrong and that she left of her own accord. If that’s the case, you don't have any obligation to pay her, do you?” When I asked this, the Captain made a pained expression.

“That is true, but... in human relationships, it’s rare for only one side to be entirely at fault. I’m sure there were areas where I fell short as well. That is something I must admit.”

“Please, we’re begging you. At this rate, the old man’s gonna get killed.” I looked at the person saying this and asked, “...Does that mean you all know the Captain’s wife?”

Everyone went silent at my casual question. With a faint sweat beading on her forehead, Tania began to speak as if letting the words spill out one by one.

“...She’s not the kind of woman you can talk sense into.”

“It was five days ago... we loaded our cargo at the port of Labant and set off for this place, Digis. This happened the day before yesterday... fog started coming in around sunset, and we were all pretty high-strung. After all, if you get too close to shore, you might hit a reef, but if you go too far out, you might get lost. Still, we had a deadline. We slowed down and put out a lookout... after dinner, it was Hans’s turn on watch.” She gestured toward one of the sailors.

“He shouted that he saw something—most of us left who we could and went out on deck to see the sea. The sun was long gone and the fog was thick. Moonlight couldn't reach us. We had hung every lamp we had around the ship, but we could only see a short distance. But, when we looked closely... beneath the fog, on the black, black water, something was moving alongside the ship. Countless, slimy, pitch-black lumps were lined up in a straight row!”

Someone swallowed hard. “The length... I can’t say for sure because it disappeared into the fog, but it was at least twice as long as our ship.”

I immediately interjected into Tania’s ghost-story-like tale. “What kind of wife is that!?”

I slammed my hand onto the table repeatedly. “Because you just said—” “So what? Is the Captain’s wife a Sea Serpent bigger than the ship? And it came to demand alimony!?”

Tania immediately replied to my shouted question with narrowed eyes. “Of course not.”

Cutting through the protest— “My wife is a Killer Whale User,” the Captain muttered.

I stopped dead in my tracks. “A Killer Whale User? Like a Beast Master?”

They exist in the world from time to time. People who have an uncanny compatibility with specific types of animals and can control them to a certain extent. No doubt about it. That’s a Beast Master. Among mages, there are theories that some kind of magical connection exists between them and the beasts, but the principles haven't been explained at all.

“I don't know what a 'Beast Master' is, but it’s a fact that my wife can move a pod of killer whales more or less as she pleases.”

“Okay, I get that she’s a Killer Whale User... but what does that have to do with anything? Orcas aren't that big to begin with, and they don't have a bunch of lumps on their backs. Honestly, this is getting annoying.”

“I told you they *looked* like lumps,” Tania said. “If a pod of orcas lines up in a row and shows their backs, that’s what it looks like. Of course, wild orcas would never line up so orderly—well, I won’t say never, but almost never. So, it’s only natural to think someone was controlling them, right?”

“Ah. I see.” I finally understood, imagining the backs of the whales lined up straight on the water’s surface. True, it might look like the undulating back of a single giant Sea Serpent.

“At any rate.” The Captain looked at me with a look of absolute seriousness. “Previous times, it seemed my wife was just scouting us out... but this time, she will definitely make a move. I was in despair, thinking there was no way out, until I reunited with you like this. From here, we’re dropping off part of the cargo and taking the rest north to the port of Tuproad. I know it’s a lot to ask. I can’t say the pay will be lavish. But could you at least stay for the three days it takes to reach Tuproad?”

...To be honest, I didn't want to get involved in something troublesome for low pay, but I didn't have a specific destination for my travels anyway. If I turned him away and something actually happened to the Captain, the aftertaste would be terrible.

“...Fine. What’s the fee?” I asked with a sigh.

Among people who live inland, some seem to have an image that Sea equals Demon Sea equals death if you go there, but of course, that isn't the case. In the first place, there is more that we *don't* know about the sea than what we do.

When not a single ship that went far out to sea ever returned—eventually, people started calling it the "Demon Sea," a sea where demons dwell. No one knows what happened to the ships that didn't come back. Many believe they were cursed by the monster race and sunk, but there’s no basis or proof for that; to be blunt, it’s just imagination. They might have sunk in giant whirlpools, or perhaps the ships actually made it to the open ocean safely and just couldn't return due to things like currents.

Naturally, there aren't buoys floating on the water that say "Demon Sea starts here." There was just a general consensus that the area visible from the mainland coast was normal sea, and anything beyond that was probably the Demon Sea.

As long as you're near the shore, it's a safe zone. People living by the sea enjoy swimming when it's hot, and fishermen go out to catch fish. Merchant ships carrying cargo naturally come and go as well.

Gazing at the blue sky and the sparkling surface of the water, it almost felt like a lie that this place connected to the Demon Sea. The sea breeze felt pleasant against my skin.

Shaking off that pleasantness, a man's booming voice rang out!

"Listen up!"

I turned around to see the hook of his prosthetic hand held toward the heavens, glinting in the midday sun. Captain Virgo looked around at all the crew members on the deck.

"It's a three-day voyage to Tuproad, and it wouldn't be strange for my wife to attack at any moment! I'm taking your lives into my hands!"

"Yeah!" the sailors shouted in unison.

"If we're caught off guard, there's no telling what'll happen! We'll find her before she makes her move—"

At any rate, I needed to hear the details from the Captain about exactly what kind of person his wife was.

"—Captain."

I caught Captain Virgo just as he was finished spurring on the crew and was about to return to his cabin. I lowered my voice.

"I need you to tell me in detail. About your wife."

The Captain's brow furrowed slightly at the mention of his "wife." Before he could open his mouth, I pressed on.

"If I don't know the opponent, I can't stand a chance at making a plan. It’s a difficult thing to talk about, I'm sure, but if we stay in the dark and find ourselves helpless when the time comes, we'll have put the cart before the horse, right?"

"....."

The Captain remained silent for a while.

To be honest, that was exactly what I was worried about. What if the Captain’s ex-wife was *that* kind of person?

If I ended up facing someone like that, I simply wouldn't be able to deal with it. Whether it left a bad taste in my mouth or meant breaking a promise, my best bet would be to use a spell to fly away as fast as possible.

"Come," he said.

We moved away from the busily scurrying sailors to a corner of the deck. I stood beside him.

"Long ago, back when I was living a carefree life as a bachelor and doing whatever I pleased... One day, news came that a distant uncle had passed away. I went to a desolate fishing village to settle the estate and sort through his belongings, and that was where I first met her."

I wondered what his gaze, fixed on the distant horizon, was actually seeing.

"At that time, she was... talking to a mackerel."

"....."

"Mackerel?"

"Yes, mackerel. The fish. She was a mysterious girl..."

Well, that certainly qualified as mysterious, I suppose. I couldn't decide if I actually wanted to know the context of that conversation. Regardless, I had no intention of listening to a long-winded story of their romance. I nudged him forward.

"So, you fell in for her?"

"Yes. She was a type I had never encountered before."

I bet. And honestly, I doubted that type would ever appear again.

"But it wasn't a case of 'and they lived happily ever after.'"

The Captain etched lines of distress into his brow.

"Yes. I realized it."

"Realize it sooner!"

The words slipped out of my mouth instinctively.

"Mmu... no, looking back now, during the thirty years of our marriage, I did have a feeling that something was slightly off, a faint sense of 'wrongness,' if you will."

So it was "faint."

"It was about five years ago... I saw my wife having a conversation with a grilled saury we were having for dinner. It occurred to me then—perhaps this wasn't so much 'mysterious' as it was just... weird."

"I see."

I couldn't deny the possibility.

Either way, the turning point of this battle would undoubtedly be whether or not we allowed the wife to close in on the ship.

"She'll probably make her move at night. She should know that you'll do something about it if she tries anything during the day. If that's the case... we could reduce the danger significantly if we just stayed at a port during the night, but..."

"I'm sorry, but I can't do that."

The answer was exactly what I expected.

"If we stop at ports, there will be all sorts of expenses. Moreover, small merchant ships of our scale pride ourselves on the speed of delivery by traveling through the night. I can't break the deadline we've advertised. And besides—"

He flashed a grin.

"You'll take care of things even if something happens, won't you?"

"...Well, I'll do my best."

I could only manage a wry smile.

I woke up because of a voice. The tension and fear contained in that shout jolted me awake.

A cramped cabin. The smell of brine. The footsteps of sailors dashing across the deck raced overhead from right to left.

It should still have been daytime. I had predicted the attack would come at night and had been taking a nap in the cabin to get into top condition.

I sprang from the bed and through the door. A few steps down a hallway too short to be called a hallway led to a narrow staircase. I climbed it.

The sea; To the right, land was visible in the distance; to the left was nothing but an endless expanse of water.

The sailors were gathered on the left side.

"Lina!"

Noticing me, Tania called out. I ran over to her and looked in the same direction. On the sea, away from the ship, a single white wake was running as if in parallel with us. Something was swimming just beneath the surface.

"A sailor spotted it."

Captain Virgo was right next to Tania, crouching low to hide as he peeked over the gunwale. He was trembling violently.

"Is it my wife!? Is it her!?"

...Hmm. This Captain, who hadn't flinched while searching for treasure near the Demon Sea, was reduced to this. Was his wife really that terrifying?

"I don't know, but—" Tania said, her eyes fixed on the white wake. "It looks like it's keeping pace with us. But it's gradually getting closer."

"It's my wiiiiiiiiife! It really is her after aaaaaaall!"

Tania gave the hysterical Captain a troubled look, then turned to me.

"Whatever that thing is, we're in trouble if the Old Man stays like this... Sorry, but can you do something?"

"I guess I have to."

I gave the Captain's shoulder a light tap. He jumped as if he'd been electrocuted.

"Captain! I'm going to take that thing down now!"

At my declaration, the Captain turned his wavering eyes toward me.

"Take it down...? You'll take it down for me!?!? My wife!?"

"Well, I don't know if that's her or not... regardless, the first move wins! I'm going to let off a big one, so watch out for the waves. You handle the ship."

"...Ah! You're going to use *that* spell?"

"That's the plan."

Captain Virgo knew about the spell I used. Naturally so, since I had used it in front of everyone before.

A glint of hope returned to the Captain's eyes.

"But... can you actually land a direct hit!?"

"The sea isn't very deep around here, so it'll probably be fine!"

Beside the Captain, who had recovered and was starting to shout directions to the crew, I began to chant the spell. The ship changed course and lowered its sails.

"Ready! Do it!"

Using Captain Virgo's words as the signal—

"Dragon Slave!"

BOOM!

With a single strike, the sea exploded!

In an instant, the displaced seawater became a downpour, and the wind and waves born from the blast sent the ship heaving violently.

And then, the Captain and I saw it.

At the moment of the explosion, a shadow leaped into the air for a split second along with the seawater. It was a long, giant shadow.

"...Oh. It was just a Sea Serpent."

"Geez... don't scare me like that..."

On the still-rocking ship, the Captain and I let out a sigh of relief.

"Hey! That's still a big deal!"

Tania cut in from the side, but the Captain just looked at her.

"What are you saying, Tania! Compared to my ex-wife, a Sea Serpent is like a choice between a flounder and a sole!"

...I didn't really get that analogy either.

"Anyway, it wasn't her."

"For now, no."

The Captain’s tone dropped.

It wasn't his wife this time—but conversely, that meant she was still out there. Shadows of anxiety fell over the Captain’s eyes as he stared at the distant water.

It wasn't the first time I'd spent a night at sea. I had spent a night on the ship back when I was helping everyone salvage treasure from the sunken ship.

Still, I couldn't get used to this.

Almost everything visible from the deck was black. Countless stars sparkled in the sky—but that sparkle cut off abruptly at the horizon, and everything below was a solid sheet of black.

If the moon were out, it would reflect on the water and show the swaying of the waves, but unfortunately, today was a new moon. The expanse of water was simply

black. I only knew land was supposed to be there because of the border with the starry sky, but not a single light was visible there.

The only real lights were the lamps hung at the bow and around the ship, but they only illuminated the nearby surface. The sound of waves lapping against the hull—*plash, gurgle*—was the only thing filling the night.

Ideally, I should have been lying down in the cabin to conserve my strength, but I had grown tired of sitting still in that cramped room—which felt more like a giant crate than a room—unable to sleep. So, I had come out onto the deck.

—Though in the end, there wasn't exactly anything to see that would take my mind off things.

"Can't sleep?"

The voice came from high above.

I looked up to see Tania looking down from atop the mast, with the starry sky at her back.

Of course, in this darkness and at this distance, I couldn't see her features clearly. I only knew it was her by her voice and silhouette. She probably felt the same; I was likely the only person on this ship wearing a cloak.

"It's not that I can't sleep, I'm just staying up," I said with a laugh. "I figured if something was going to happen, it would be at night. I slept in the afternoon."

"Ah. No wonder I didn't see you except for that Sea Serpent commotion."

I turned my gaze back to the black sea.

"Do you think she's coming?"

She didn't ask "Who?"

"The threatening letter the Old Man got apparently said she'd heard about the treasure and wouldn't let him have all the fun by himself."

Tania’s voice drifted down from the sky.

"And then she just shows her face on a foggy night and disappears. I don't know the ex-wife personally, but from what I've heard from the Old Man and others, she sounds

like the type to do that. She'll whip the Old Man into a total frenzy of fear first... then she'll come. Definitely."

...What a nasty wife.

"If she has the energy and willpower for that kind of thing, she should really use it for something else—"

I cut myself off. It was a faint sense of "wrongness."

I heard something that sounded like a different wave mixing in with the monotonous sound of the water hitting the ship.

"Port-quarter!"

Tania must have heard it too, or perhaps she fell silent for another reason—"Waves on the port side!" Her tense voice rang through the night.

I looked toward where Tania's voice was coming from above the mast, but to my eyes, it was just the black sea. However...

"—Ngh!"

Captain Virgo let out a groan; it seemed the eyes of a man who lived on the sea had caught something.

"—Another wave! Coming straight at us from the port side!"

Tania's voice rang out again.

From two directions!?

"A pincer attack!? What do we do!!!"

The Captain looked at me—I didn't hide the truth.

"Honestly, I can't see these waves. Even if I fire off a spell, it's impossible to aim accurately. Still—if I fire one off, it should at least act as a deterrent!"

"I get it! Then, when I give the signal—" The Captain pointed with a slightly trembling finger toward the area directly behind the ship. "Aim for that distance directly behind the ship and fire! I'll handle the steering! You know this, but the waves will come and

the ship will rock! After you fire, make sure you grab onto something so you don't get thrown overboard!"

"Got it!"

The Captain headed for the helm, shouting at the top of his lungs.

"Hold on to something!"

"Tania! Get down here! Wake the boys up!"

"Right!"

As expected of comrades who knew each other's ways, Tania was already sliding down the mast before the Captain had even finished his order, sprinting off with a spirited reply.

Then, the ship woke up.

The sailors who had scrambled out of bed handled the vessel with frantic energy. The creaking of the rudder echoed faintly, and the hoisted sails shifted their orientation. The sound of the waves intensified as the ship turned and the sails were furled—

"Now!"

At Captain Virgo's signal, I unleashed the spell I had been chanting!

"Dragon Slave!"

Z-DOOOOOOOOM!

A flash of light seared the night and the sea. Borrowing the power of the Demon King, a strike capable of slaying even dragons turned the dark of night into a split-second noon. *GO-ZAAAH!*

The strike detonated much closer to us than the one I had fired at the Sea Serpent during the day! The waves and wind born of the explosion, along with the sudden downpour of displaced seawater, toyed with the rickety merchant ship.

I clung to a nearby railing to keep from being tossed overboard. Once the shaking gradually subsided and the rain of seawater let up—

"Did... did we get it!?"

The Captain's question was mixed half with fear and half with hope.

"I don't know," I answered honestly.

Water transmits shockwaves easily, but on the other hand, it also serves to hide the opponent from our eyes.

"I didn't feel a direct hit. I don't think it was a clean shot. However, I can't imagine anything caught in that vicinity underwater coming out unscathed."

In any case, we could see nothing in this situation.

"Someone! Does anyone see anything!?"

At the Captain's call, everyone peered out at the sea from their respective posts for a while.

"I see nothing," Tania said first, followed by the other sailors one after another, repeating the same words: "Nothing here either."

After every single person had spoken, a heavy silence took hold. Only the sound of the waves soaked into the night wind.

"If... if we haven't finished it..."

Captain Virgo’s voice was trembling.

"It will surely come again."

As if waiting for those very words:

"Wave to the port quarter!" one of the sailors shouted.

"I see something like lumps on the water! Three of them!"

Despite it being night, I could clearly see the Captain's face turn pale.

"It’s her! It’s my wife! R-Run for it!"

"Calm down!"

I barked at the panicked Captain.

"Do you really think we can outrun her!? We have to fight!"

"Ugh... right. S-Sorry...!"

"We’re doing this! Handle the ship and give me the signal!"

"R-Right!"

I began chanting the spell again while the sailors scrambled about.

"Now! Right there!"

At the spot the Captain pointed out while shouting, I fired once more.

"Dragon Slave!"

Wind, waves, shaking, and a spray of rain.

It seemed there was no direct hit this time either. The fundamental problem was that I couldn't see the target. However, if I fired a Dragon Slave at a distance close enough to see the enemy, the shockwave and waves would undoubtedly sink this ship.

"It’s okay!"

I shouted out with false bravado.

Panic was starting to spread. This was bad. If everyone on board succumbed to panic, things would be hopeless. Even I felt a stir of unease deep in my chest that threatened to break through to the surface if I let my guard down for even a second.

"I have a plan! No time to explain, so move! Captain, keep giving orders!"

After I barked those words and began chanting again, the Captain and the crew managed to regain some of their sanity and began handling the ship once more. I stood at the stern of the vessel.

"Now!"

The Captain's voice was tinged with despair. Agitation spread among the crew.

Before the waves created by the previous spell could even settle, Tania’s voice was nearly a scream.

"To the rear—!"

"Damn it! How!? How!?"

The Captain screamed! But I didn't release the spell.

The Captain, in his haste, yelled, "What's wrong!? Hurry—"

"Old man!"

Perhaps sensing my intent, Tania cut the Captain off. The silence that followed, however, was far from noiseless. There was the creaking of the hull. The sound of wind brushing against the mast. And a different sound of waves—coming from far behind the ship!

There!

"Dragon Slave!"

The sea was dyed in light. Within that light, I saw it.

"A Sea Serpent...!"

The Captain, who had seen the same thing I did, cried out in shock.

Yes. Looking at the silhouette, there was no mistaking it. It was a Sea Serpent. It disappeared into the light, struck by the dragon-slaying spell. It wasn't exactly a colossal specimen, but it was a Sea Serpent nonetheless.

After the baptism of wind and waves had subsided—

"Wait, was that the same one from today?"

At Tania's voice, I kept my eyes on the spot where I'd seen it and shook my head.

"No way. I definitely finished off the one from today. ...Is this area just a territory where Sea Serpents appear often?"

The Captain replied immediately to my question.

"There’s no way."

"The land isn't far, and it isn't that deep. If things like that were wandering around all the time, this wouldn't be a route for merchant ships."

He was right. According to books I’d read, it was quite rare for a Sea Serpent to appear in a place like this.

In that case—and I was a little scared to ask—I had to check just in case.

"Just to be sure... I’m going to ask. I-I hope I'm wrong, but... is there any chance the ex-wife can control Sea Serpents too, and not just orcas?"

The air on deck froze. Captain Virgo’s voice was shaking terribly.

"I haven't heard of such a thing... but... even if she could, I wouldn't be surprised..."

"....."

Oh, I get it. I get it perfectly.

I'm going to fire and fire and keep on firing!

I snapped and started howling, and the Captain and his crew simply obeyed.

We learned that miracles *do* happen if you work hard enough.

With the crew and the hull both battered to pieces, but with everyone still accounted for, the ship reached the port of Tuproad.

If things had gone according to plan, they were according to plan—but of course, there were plenty of things that were completely unexpected.

The morning harbor was full of life, with ships and people coming and going. After we finally reached our destination, the sailors gathered what remained of their willpower and physical strength to begin unloading the cargo. I stood alone at the edge of the deck, idly watching the work and the harbor.

"Oh, this is the ship. This is it."

Hearing a voice, I looked over to see a horse-drawn carriage and two men who clearly looked like manual laborers. The one who had come with them was a scrawny, middle-aged mage in a black cloak. They had approached our ship.

He seemed to be the recipient of the cargo. The mage spoke with the Captain, and the two laborers began loading the crates onto the carriage.

Of course, the mage—who didn't give a damn about our circumstances—began complaining endlessly to the apologetic Captain and crew, grumbling about how the "potency would be diluted" or something.

I was letting their exchange wash over me with a disinterested gaze when suddenly, a thought flashed through my exhausted mind.

"Wait a second!"

Before I knew it, I was heading toward them.

Recognizing my attire, the middle-aged mage looked a bit taken aback.

"W-Who are you?"

"Just someone who happened to be on this ship. More importantly—" I pointed to the damp cargo. "Is the content of this crate by any chance some kind of medicinal herb?"

"Well... yes."

"What's the effect?"

When I pressed him, the middle-aged mage looked slightly annoyed.

"Why should I have to tell you—"

"Is it an ingredient for a medicine that certain animals or fish find... attractive?"

At my hunch, the mage gasped slightly.

"You...! How...! Don't tell me you're planning to steal my research!?"

So that's it.

Various things began to click together in my head.

I stepped closer to the middle-aged mage and lowered my voice.

"That's not it. I don't know what kind of research you're doing, but I'll give you some advice. You should rethink this research of yours. Otherwise, you're going to keep attracting Sea Serpents."

"What...?"

As the mage frowned, I continued.

"Because of the leak, the bags of herbs got wet. And this ship, you see, was attacked by countless Sea Serpents on the way here. Luckily I was on board, so I managed to repel them. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The mage gave a cold sneer.

"Are you trying to threaten me? I'll have you know, I don't—"

The expression on his face froze mid-sentence.

".....Could it... be...?"

Apparently, he finally understood.

I looked up at him.

"Just so you know, I'm not making this up. The bags getting wet in the first place might have been because this ship is a wreck and leaked a little. But—look at what happened because of it."

"N... No way...!"

The mage looked despairing, his knees knocking together.

"Pardon me, but what exactly is going on...?"

Captain Virgo asked, completely lost. Without a word, the mage moved with sluggish motions to hand over the payment. Then, leading the two equally confused laborers, he walked away with his head hanging low.

"What was that all about?"

I watched his retreating figure and turned to the Captain.

"Captain. There’s something I want to ask... Do you still have that first threatening letter?"

"No... I disposed of it as soon as I finished reading it."

"How did you know it was from your ex-wife?"

When I asked, he looked at me as if I were asking something obvious.

"What do you mean 'how'? I know her handwriting when I see it."

So that really was it.

In that moment, my hypothesis turned into a conviction.

"Collect everyone. I have something important to say."

I said to Captain Virgo with determination.

On the deck blown by the sea breeze, the sailors looked at each other, wondering what was about to happen. Once everyone was gathered, I made my grand declaration.

"I’ve finally figured out the truth behind this incident."

"The truth?"

Everyone began to buzz at those words.

"What do you mean?"

The Captain asked on behalf of everyone, and I gave a large nod.

"I’ve been wondering this the whole time. Where exactly was the ex-wife? If she was directing a series of attacks, she had to be within a distance where she could see us. But not a single one of us saw her. We were on the open sea with nowhere to hide. Since she’s presumably human, she shouldn't be able to stay submerged forever. So, where was she?"

"Wait—no way!"

Tania’s face went pale at my words, and she looked around at the group with eyes full of terror.

"Does that mean...!? Don't tell me... 'The wife is among us!'"

At her words, the group erupted into an uproar—

“No, no, no, no, no! That’s not it! Not even close!”

I hurriedly waved my hands back and forth, denying the claim.

“She’s not here. She isn't among us. Or rather... she was never here to begin with.”

A heavy silence fell over the group for a moment.

“...What...?”

The raspy voice belonged to Captain Virgo. I turned to face him directly.

“Because everyone knew the Captain had received a threatening letter, and everyone knew his wife was a Killer Whale User, you all just assumed this was her doing.”

Ignoring the growing murmurs, I pressed on.

“That’s how it started. Then, when the Sea Serpent attacks became frequent, I accidentally blurted out that maybe she could control Sea Serpents as well as orcas. It’s true that having Sea Serpents appear so close to shore in succession is abnormal. That’s why everyone—myself included—half-believed that theory. But...”

“Initially, when you got the letter, you were certain it was your wife’s handwriting.”

“U... um, yes.”

“In other words, her name wasn't actually written clearly as the sender, right?”

Again, the crew began to buzz.

“B-But!”

“And on that foggy night, everyone saw the lumps in the water.”

I cut off the Captain as he tried to protest and continued.

“But what if there was another cause entirely?”

“...Another cause...?” Tania whispered. Beside her, Captain Virgo gave a small nod, as if something had occurred to him.

“This is just a hypothesis, but... this ship is pretty old. Apparently, there was a small leak in the hull. It wasn't serious enough to sink the ship, but it was enough to get the cargo wet. I think that leak has been there since you loaded the cargo, and nobody noticed. And among that cargo were medicinal herbs loaded by a mage for his experiments.”

Everyone was silent now, hanging on my every word.

“The mage who ordered them didn't seem to know, but apparently those herbs contained an ingredient that Sea Serpents love. I don't know if it was the taste or the smell, but...”

I began to pace slowly across the deck for no particular reason.

“The ingredient dissolved into the water that leaked into the hold, and then it seeped back out into the sea, bit by bit, carried by the currents. If that’s what was calling the Sea Serpents to us... then everything else follows. The Captain assumed the letter with similar handwriting was from his wife. Everyone saw the first Sea Serpent—attracted by the medicine—and assumed its humps were a pod of orcas controlled by her. And everyone, including me, assumed that a woman like that *might* just be capable of sending a swarm of Sea Serpents after us. In the end, this entire incident was born from fear and imagination regarding a wife who wasn't even there.”

I said it once more.

“The wife was never here.”

Silence descended upon the deck. The cries of sea birds and the sound of waves—the bustle of the wharf began to sink into my ears.

“...B-But...”

In the Captain’s eyes, various emotions mingled, resulting in a look of pure confusion.

“It’s just a... hypothesis, isn't it?”

“It’s a hypothesis,” I admitted.

I couldn't verify if the herbs really contained an ingredient Sea Serpents loved, or if the leak had truly been there from the start.

“But think about it calmly. The idea that the letter was from your wife, that the humps in the fog were her orcas, and that she had the power to control Sea Serpents... those are all just hypotheses too.”

A collective groan escaped the sailors.

“Besides, if the wife really were involved... if she wanted money, there’s no point in sending Sea Serpents to sink the ship along with the Captain. And if she wanted to threaten him, the threat loses its effectiveness if I’m on board to fight them off. If the Captain’s wife were really the kind of person you all think she is, wouldn't she just show up in person and demand the money? Or maybe show her face from a distance, give a nasty grin, and then leave?”

The sailors erupted into a loud chatter.

“...S-She’s right! Exactly...!”

The Captain let out a shocked gasp. His eyes began to shine with hope.

“So, that means—”

I gave a firm nod.

“The wife—she was nothing more than an illusion created by the darkness in your hearts. There’s no such thing. There is no longer anything to worry about.”

At my declaration, the Captain and the entire crew let out a cheer that echoed throughout the entire port.

And so, the incident was settled... or rather, I wonder if this could even be called an "incident" in the first place.

Certainly, the fact that the herb ingredients leaked and caused Sea Serpent attacks was a major event. In that sense, I accepted the reward as originally agreed upon for protecting the ship. But as for the "Great Monster Wife Attack" that everyone, including me, had envisioned? That person didn't exist anywhere.

People fear what they cannot see and what they do not understand.

A darkness born from a doubting heart. In a way, it’s something necessary for survival, and something that follows us throughout our lives.

But take heed, people. Do not let your own feet be swept out from under you by the illusions your own mind creates.

With those thoughts in mind, I spent my reward money on eating crab and other delicacies in the seaside port town.

(The Wife Who Is Right There: End)

Afterword

Author: Spring has come! The book is out! So! Here is *Slayers Special* Volume 24, *The Threat of the Underground Kingdom*!

L: .....Well..... I guess it’s out, so there's no helping it, but you'd better take responsibility.

Author: Responsibility for what? And why do you sound like the book "accidentally" came out? If books came out by accident, editors and authors wouldn't have such a hard time!

L: Judging by that anger, it sounds like you struggled with the deadline again.

Author: D-Don't say it! Don't utter those cursed two words!

L: If deadlines are such a problem, you should just start the manuscript earlier.

Author: Why does this person talk like Marie Antoinette!? If I could do that, I wouldn't be struggling! I think and think and think and think... and then I think "I'll do it later" and play games, watch TV, build models, read manga, take a nap, realize I’m in trouble, and then think and think some more! I struggle to make these stories! I get so exhausted I get lazy with the sub-characters' names! Fine, yes, the mole's name was based on soy sauce and kelp!

L: ...Did I just hear something I can't sympathize with at all?

Author: Anyway, about this year’s New Year’s card!

L: Wow, he changed the subject so blatantly! Fine... (Looking at the card) It’s just a picture of me sitting on a fallen tree... wait, is there a hidden "bird" in here somewhere like the "monkey" from last year?

Author: No. Nothing like that this year.

L: ...Oh.

Author: Obviously, I thought of the card last year. And last year, when you thought of "birds," the first thing that came to mind was the bird flu incident. I figured making a dark joke about that would be bad.

L: So you removed the bird and just drew me.

Author: Yes! Titled: "L: 10th Day Stranded, Main Diet is Fallen Trees!"

L: What kind of extreme survival situation is that!?

Author: You've even started seeing "friends" in front of you that don't exist!

S: Ugh... that's why I told you not to underestimate the mountains...

L: Oh, look who's back with a family comment!

Author: It happens, you know. People underestimate a peaceful hiking course, try to take a shortcut, get lost, and go the wrong way thinking "It must be this way." You must never do that in the mountains. The vast majority of people who get into accidents are those who thought "I'll be fine," not those who thought "I might get into an accident."

L: Now we're getting the expert's opinion...?

S: I'm sure Miss L is safe! Even beetles live off tree sap!

L: You're comparing me to a beetle!? Though I did think the beetle jelly at the department store looked a little tasty... but I won't stand for this! I shall wash away this humiliation with beetle jelly!

S: No! Not the beetle jelly—!

Author: What on earth are you doing with that?

L: Like this!

(Editor's Note: Due to crime prevention concerns and consideration for the All Japan Beetle Jelly Promotion Committee, 15 lines of description have been omitted. We ask for our readers' understanding.)

(A windy ruin. L stands before a crater 200 meters in diameter.)

L: So this... is the true power of beetle jelly... Hmph... the moment you saw this as mere insect food, your fate was sealed—

Even so... as long as *Slayers* afterwords exist in this world, the author will surely be resurrected one day... Just as predicted, he's back without batting an eye. I'm sure it'll be the same next time. I feel like we need a more fundamental countermeasure. I wish a pharmaceutical company would release "Author Killer: Wipes out persistent authors at the root! Dangerous without mixing!"

But! No matter how many times the author revives, I will surely defeat him!

(L clenches her fist with a strange new determination. The camera pulls back while rotating, and the screen slowly blacks out. Staff credits roll from the bottom. End mark.)

(Afterword: End)